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Ethical Issues and Policy Implementation in Student-Faculty Communication in Higher Education

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Abstract

Higher education is where students are trained in character and learning. Students have a lot to learn from the actions and inactions of faculty. The interaction between students and faculty exists because students need faculty and faculty need students for higher education goals to be achieved. The relationship between faculty and students must be built on high ethical standards. Ethics ensures that the right things are said and done as faculty and students interact for the purpose of education. Mutual respect on the part of students and faculty is needed to foster an environment where healthy learning can take place. To this end, this article explores the importance of ethics and policy implementation in students-faculty communication in higher education particularly in Nigeria. Some ethical issues are identified in Nigeria's higher education and recommendations are offered.

Keywords: Ethical Issues, Policy Implementation, Student-Faculty, Communication, Higher Education.

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INTRODUCTION

Universities are institutions that are held in high esteem. They produce knowledge through research, teaching, and service. They are also saddled with the responsibility of training the students in character and learning for the effective running of organizations and societies. In order to effectively deliver on these responsibilities, the universities must teach the students "integrity, honesty, loyalty, patriotism, commitment, hard work, professionalism, excellence" (Ekwukoma & Osagiobare, 2021, p. 25). As a citadel of learning, the university must ensure that all appearances of unethical behaviors are nib in the board. Whether these unethical behaviors are exhibited by faculty, staff or students the right actions must be taken to serve as deterrent to

others who might want to commit the same infractions (Ekwukoma & Osagiobare, 2021). Wordu (2023) believed that digital technology and globalization have been responsible for the diffusion of cultures thereby influencing the behaviors of faculty, staff and students in higher education. The influence in the behavior of faculty, staff and students must be in tandem with the right ethical standards. And ethical standards have to be reflected in the communication between faculty and students in classes and outside of classes (Caleb, 2020).

Ethics is required everywhere including higher education so actors can maintain and respect codes governing such institutions. And to maintain these codes or rules discipline and the right communication are required. Lack of discipline is at the core of rules violation by students, teachers, and school authorities. Kayode and Adeyinka (2009) believe that discipline can be conceptualized as readiness or ability to respect authority and observe conventional or established laws of society or of any other organization. Discipline encompasses a lot of dedication to obeying established rules in an organization or society. Discipline implies self-control, restraint, respect for self and respect for others (Adesina, 1980, as cited in Ajayi & Adeniyi, 2009).

Discipline is always in place to deter individuals from committing a crime or undermining rules. Policies are created by the relevant authorities to prescribe the standard required of higher education actors and the corresponding punishment when such standards are undermined. Policies are not formulated for fun. Policies are formulated to address issues in education, especially education policies. Policies have meaning in their implementation, so, ethical issues and low attainment of education goals result from poor implementation of educational policies in universities (Anukaeny, 2019; Dialoke & Veronica, 2017). A university system that is based on high ethical standard is what the society needs for its development especially as education is the vehicle for societal development. Wordu (2023) asserted that "education is adjudged as a fulcrum for societal development, and economic empowerment of individuals and helps them acquire certain critical and innovative skills that help them to navigate the challenges of life" (p. 34).

CONCEPTUALIZATION

The Concept of Ethics

As higher education institutions are established to cater to the education needs of people, it follows that the question of what is right or wrong will continue to permeate the interaction of stakeholders within school system and the rightness or wrongness of an act hinges on ethics (Ajayi & Adeniji, 2009). Ajayi and Adeniji (2009) define ethics as "the disciplined reflection on morality that constitutes the branch of philosophy that studies moral questions" (p. 285). Maiyaki and Aliyu (2022) saw ethics as "a well-established subfield of philosophy that investigates the origins of human values and standards and seeks to place them within various conceptions of the human person and the human social context" (pp. 10-11). It is evident from the definitions that what is right or wrong constitute ethics and higher education as part of the society shares in the corruption and unethical behaviors that have continued to ravage the Nigerian society (Okunlola & Obadare, 2016). In higher education environment, ethical conducts are expected to be demonstrated by lecturers, staff and students and as a citadel of learning, the university is required to maintain high ethical standard in teaching, research, examination related activities and other areas of endeavor (Ekwukoma & Osagiobare, 2021).

Ethics measures the morality of individuals within societies and institutions including higher education in Nigeria. Institutions are built on principles and laws therefore; any attempt to violate the laws and principles questions the ethical standing of the violators. Tom (2004) as cited in Abiogun (2014) noted that wherever there is a community of people, there are norms and mores that guide their practices. Thus, Ethics offers impartial and universal sound reason for living. Kayode and Adeyinka (2009) believe that "ethics is about behavior and about ways of thinking and communication, especially in a situation where our choice can affect the dignity and well-being of others" (p. 285). The behavior of people, whether in an organization like higher education or elsewhere must conform to the norms and mores or laws and principles which have been agreed to guide the organization. So, in higher education situation, there are rules guiding the conduct of teachers and students (Ngonso, 2022). Spelling out what is right or wrong is to enable people to act within stipulated laws to avoid any breakdown of law and order. To maintain orderliness, individual's activities must be anchored on ethics which dictates the rightness or wrongness of an action in organization (Ekwukoma & Osagiobare, 2021; Kayode & Adeyinka, 2009; Wordu, 2023). Higher education institutions create policies that strengthen ethical standard for the effective training of students and keep every other actors within the ambit of institutional codes of conduct. Kayode and Adeyinka (2009) assert that:

> In the tertiary institutions, the purpose of discipline is to produce graduates who will be well behaved in the society by differentiating what is good from what is bad and striving to do good for the general welfare of the society. Most educated elites, government, parents and even all stakeholders in education recognize the fact that educating youths to conform to the acceptable rules and regulations of the society is not an easy task and as such, it must be the joint efforts of the parents, the church, the school and the government (p. 287).

It is important therefore for organizations such as higher education institutions to practice ethical standards in all spheres of their academic endeavors with a bid to getting the students to learn the right values in school and exhibit such in the society.

Ethical Issues in Higher Education in Nigeria

Higher education in Nigeria comprises Universities, Colleges of Education, Polytechnics, Monotechnics (NPE, 2004). There are many reasons for which laws are enacted in higher education institutions. One of such reasons is for higher education mandates to be achieved. However Ngonso (2022) observes that:

> An education system where the government is the major proprietor and at the same time the initiator and implementer of legal and moral framework, ethical values are often undermined while in the education sector where non-state actors are major proprietors, ethical principles are upheld. This tends to be the greatest problem in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. In Nigeria for instance, there are several ethical and administrative issues confronting the education sector (p. 55).

These ethical issues are so rife that they are affecting the standard of education in the country. They cut across all aspects of higher education in Nigeria. Some of the ethical issues that have almost destroyed higher education in Nigeria are falsifying coursework, falsifying records for accreditation, monetary gratification and sexual harassment, absenteeism and lateness to classes, nepotism and allocation of unmerited grades, lopsided invigilation, unhealthy communication, etc. The list of ethical issues in higher education in Nigeria cannot be exhausted in this paper.

Falsification of Coursework

Coursework, sometimes, is the combination of test and assignment which a student is expected to undergo in a semester to measure their level of assimilation. Where examination is 60% coursework becomes 40%, this largely depends on the institution and or departments, as there are cases of 70% in examination and coursework 30%. Whatever is the case; many lecturers do not grade tests or assignments but simply falsify a certain score and award such to students (Ngonso, 2022; Wordu, 2023). This act does not account for true reflection of the learner's ability in such a course. Many institutions do not monitor how and what lecturers do with their coursework thereby making mockery of the coursework system.

Falsification of Academic Records for Accreditation

In Nigeria, there are statutory bodies in charge of higher education levels. For instance, National Universities Commission (NUC) is in charge of Universities, National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) is in charge of Polytechnics and Monotechnics and National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) is in charge of Colleges of Education in Nigeria. One of the mandates of these bodies is to accredit existing and new courses for the institutions in the country (Ngonso, 2022; Wordu, 2023). Sadly, schools falsify the number of admitted students in order to attain the "carrying capacity" of a department. NUC may have mandated a University to admit 20 students in a particular department and in violation of this policy; the department might admit 50 students with the knowledge of the management of the school. So, in order to be accredited, the department will reduce the attendance of the students to 20 which will be presented to the NUC accreditation team. Sometimes, lecturers are hired from other schools to pose as lecturers in the department seeking accreditation (Ngonso, 2022).

Monetary Gratification and Sexual Harassment

There are lecturers who are notorious for awarding marks for the benefit of money and sex. Ngonso (2022) observes that:

> There are two sets of deformed lecturers in Nigeria's tertiary institutions. The first group is the avaricious lecturers who can do anything for money and material gains. These intaglios in their rapacious behavior lure student to give them bribes or material gifts for marks they do not deserve. Another category of deformed lecturers in Nigeria's higher education is pleasure seekers. These lecturers are the ones who award marks for sex (p. 63).

Some Universities and Polytechnics in Nigeria have been trying to purge themselves of these notorious lecturers. Sex for marks is one of the unethical behaviors of some higher education lecturers have been found to have engaged in in the past years and as bad as it appears, there are dedicated and hardworking lecturers in higher education institutions in Nigeria who abhor unethical practices and behaviors (Caleb, 2020).

Absenteeism and Lateness to Classes

This is predominant in the nation's post-secondary education sector and one of the reasons is that many lecturers are engaged in some other businesses which usually delay them or make them stay away from classes completely. Some lecturers, owing to over-engagement, may be attending to other institutions while their primary (employer) institution suffers (Ngonso, 2022).

Nepotism and Allocation of Unmerited Grades

Many lecturers are influenced by the family members in their class. These lecturers go as far as awarding unmerited grades to the students because of the relationship they share. Sometimes, these lecturers solicit marks from other lecturers in other departments for their family members, their children, and those with whom they share canal knowledge (Wordu, 2023). This is highly unethical because such student might graduate well but cannot defend or justify their grades.

Lopsided Examination Invigilation

There are lecturers who indulge in the act of being too strict in examination invigilation to some set of students and not others in the same examination hall. Some of these lecturers collect money in the hall to allow students cheat and others allow students cheat because of the relationship that exists between the lecturers and the students. Ngonso (2022) observed that:

> Examination malpractice has reached its peak in Nigeria's tertiary institutions. Lecturers even aid students to cheat in examinations. As invigilators sometimes take their eyes off the students to enable them 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 (p. 65).

Student-Teacher Communication

No doubt, student-teacher communication has evolved over the years with the use of social media (Ahmadgholami et al., 2021). And the teaching system has been and it is being shaped by the fact that teaching could be conducted via zoom and other channels which has reduced the physical meetings and increased other ways through which students and teachers communicate (Manning, 2018). Ethics is very important in the relationship between teachers and students and it is vital that ethical standards are set to guide classes and interaction not only between teachers and students including other actors (Abubakar, 2024). Teachers must understand that their responsibilities include providing the students with high moral standards needed to be better

persons (Abubakar, 2024). Students must understand that they are important to the success of a class and this is contingent on how they are treated by the teachers. Teachers have the responsibility of equal treatment of the students without discrimination. The respect exemplified by teachers assures the students of reciprocal respect in the class (Abubakar, 2024). Teachers must be seen to demonstrate high ethical standard to the emulation of the student because teachers serve as role models to the students. Teachers should demonstrate high ethical standard in all activities involving students including abhorring inappropriate behaviors and zero tolerance for academic frauds (Abubakar, 2024). Considering the importance of good communication between teachers and students, Abubakar (2024) distinguished that:

> Good communication between teachers and students is highly dependent on ethics. Ethical teachers will be able to create an inclusive and open classroom atmosphere, where every student feels valued and accepted. Empathy and respect for students' options are also part of ethics in educational communication (p. 352).

Teachers have enormous responsibilities to shape students' learning and behavior. Teachers who are ethically upright treat students with high regard and respect. The regard and respect for students put the students on the right path even after leaving school (Abubakar, 2024). Good communication, born out of ethical standards, enhance learning and class participation particularly when the students know that their views and thoughts are valued and respected by the teacher and other students (Abubakar, 2024). Teacher-students communication is not limited to the class alone. There are other channels of communication outside the classroom open to teachers and students with ethical implications, Lase and Lase (2020) noted:

> Many students send SMS to lecturers using the language used by their friends. Students use modern spoken language or often called slang, misuse punctuation marks such as exclamation marks, or insert emotion images that their peers should only use. Currently, it is suspected that communication ethics are no longer maintained; students may not know or are lazy to bother speaking in polite language because it will be troublesome for them. After all, they must find a standard language that is considered appropriate if it is intended for lecturers who should be respected (p. 2087).

In view of the abuse of electronic channels of communication, universities are devising means and applying guidelines to ensure standards in student – teacher communication (Lase & Lase, 2020). Ethical standards are important to be upheld whether in a face to face or electronic communication between teachers and students. Standard and formal language must be used to convey messages and to show mutual respect among school actors (Abubakar, 2024; Lase & Lase, 2020). The need for ethics in higher education and indeed in human interaction cannot be ignored. In stating the negative effect of unethical behavior, Lase and Lase (2020) asserted that ethical issues in communication, especially in higher education institutions, need special attention. These ethical issues, if left unchecked, will erode the ethical values of Indonesian Culture, which have been upheld as rules that must be followed (p. 2089-2090).

Ethical issue is not confined to one country or continent in isolation of others. Unethical behavior affects higher education across the world including Nigeria (Ekwukoma & Osagiobare,

2021). Unethical communication has become a challenge in higher education which deserves concerted effort by all stake holders and policy makers in higher education. The menace of unethical communication should be eliminated to avoid a collapse of morality on higher education campuses across the world (Abubakar, 2024; Ekwukoma & Osagiobare, 2021; Lase & Lase, 2024; Ngonso, 2022). To ensure healthy communication in higher education and indeed education in general, teachers have to brace up to demonstrate their readiness to be sure that they are engaged in the right communication at all times because most of their activities revolve around students, therefore the quality of their communication is very important to develop the students' character in line with right ethical standard (Almadgholami et al., 2021). Universities are established with visions and missions and the most important for the average university is to train students professionally with the right character and attitude (Wordu, 2023). It is often said that respect begets respect, therefore teachers with high moral standard will train their student to possess such standards for peaceful coexistence in the universities and the society in general (Abubakar, 2024). And to achieve this, teacher and students must communicate and relate with one another with respect and trust (Abubakar, 2024).

Policy Implementation

The ethical issues so far raised, will better be addressed by well formulated policies that are implemented to the latter. Where there is no law, there is no transgression whatsoever, therefore, for stakeholders to be held liable for perpetrating these unethical standards there has to be policy or policies in place. An educational policy is a comprehensive, progressive, and negotiated document/statement of a nation's educational intentions formulated usually through a political process and rooted in the nation's culture, ideology and socio-economic systems (Anukaenyi, 2019). Policies are formulated to address challenges and unethical practices ravaging organizations. Nigeria's higher education deserves policies to arrest and nip unethical behaviors in the board. Policies have to be implemented by those who have been saddled with such responsibilities. It will therefore amount to nothing to ask the culprits of these issues to execute the policies meant to check them. Ngonso (2022) argued that for policies to be implemented effectively; the policy makers should be different from those saddled with the responsibility of implementing such policies that have been formulated for the check and control of the ills in any institution

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION

The issues of falsification of coursework, falsification of academic records for accreditation, monetary gratification, sexual harassment, absenteeism and lateness to classes, nepotism and allocation of unmerited grades, lopsided examination invigilation and unhealthy communication can well be addressed with the right policies where the implementers are different from the formulators. This is an advocacy aimed toward enhancing proper monitoring and evaluation of teacher-student activities in higher education in Nigeria.

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