Promoting Ethics and Academic Integrity in Higher Education

Kwesi Yankah, PhD

Minister of State, Tertiary Education, Ghana

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Prelude

Issues about ethics in Higher Education are issues linked with one of the most revered domains in national life: Education. This is one direction to which the society looks for leadership, guidance, the creation and transmission of knowledge, the provision of light in the midst of darkness. In one of non-formal/adult education projects undetaken in Ghana several years ago, where non-literate mothers were taught how to read and write, the impact was indeed a life changer for the now literate women, one of whom joyously exclaimed: "Thank God, we have also seen the light.

Education of course sheds light and drives development, compelling the world in the past few decades to project education in economic terms. The knowledge economy is a term introduced by Peter Drucker, to represent the domain; and like Pierre Bourdieu's coinage, 'knowledge capital,' this perceives knowledge as a commodity

produced, demanded, sold and bought, and even discarded when its value diminishes or peters out.

Knowing the central role of education in development, Governments in several parts of the world exempt the realm of education from taxation, because education is a national good, that yields dividends from which the entire country benefits. In Ghana and several parts of Africa, education takes the biggest chunk of the national budget: between 22% and 26% of the national budget, and is responsible for 6-8% of the GDP.

Academic Freedom

In the realm of Higher Education, one refers to the very last stage of formal education, from which the student steps into the world of work; and it is not surprising this domain enjoys certain privileges, like Academic Freedom, which is meant to insulate the realm from interference by Governments in what they teach, what is learned, critical inquiry by faculty and students, as well as their governance. These are considered essential ingredients in prosecuting the vision of universities. Scholars indeed should have the freedom to teach, learn and communicate ideas without censor, harassment, or persecution. It is founded on the conviction that scholars attain their ultimate fulfillment if they have unrestricted liberty to question received wisdom, and also advance controversial and even unpopular opinions, without fear of censure.

Expectations of Honor

These privileges extended to universities come with expectations of a high sense of responsibility, and a high sense of moral integrity, which are considered integral to the knowledge capital acquired. *To whom much is given much is expected.*

The in-built honor conferred in being associated with a university, and a good university at that, is such that lobbying for membership of university governing councils can be robust in places, due to the tremendous leverage this confers on the university's associates. In most cases services rendered are voluntary, and attract no monetary rewards to membership, except insofar as council members may rather donate generously to cherished university causes.

It is also significant that when the Integrity International releases annual reports on the state of global corruption, education is hardly cited as a fertile site for corruption. That is perhaps why whenever there have been major ethical breaches on the educational front, these have often made bold headlines.

Critical Interventions

The moral integrity associated with universities has occasionally been directly harvested by states and institutions to redeem local or national crises that may be traced to corruption or moral laxity, since the likelihood of academics publicly compromising their honor or

dignity is considered slim. I cite the example of Nigeria, where a successive pattern of high electoral irregularities at the national level, particularly in 2007, was arrested in the 2011 elections, where the new Chairman of the Independent Electoral Commission, a university professor, decided to look beyond the routine choice of electoral officers, and this time fielded largely university professors and academics as key electoral officers. The huge success of Nigeria's 2011 election, its globally acclaimed transparency, and the reduction of electoral irregularities to the minimum, were partly attributed to the vision of the Chairman, and his direct involvement of academia in critical areas. This was indeed confirmed by Professor Attahiru Jega himself, when he was invited to Ghana, to share his experiences prior to Ghana's own 2012 elections.

Competitive Labor Market

Ethical breaches in higher education could be further heightened by the current highly competitive labor market, and the frightening unemployment rate in weaker economies; which often compel the cultivation of quick fixes and pseudo claims to academic excellence in hopes of getting a competitive edge in employment. To a certain extent, this makes continents like Africa even more vulnerable. With a population of 200 million people aged between 15 and 24 years, and representing the youth, Africa is regarded as the youngest continent, or rather the youngest population in the world, with the highest

percentage of talented youth, but without the capacity to optimally convert the abundant stock of energy to employable skills.

The Gross Enrollment Ratio for Higher Education could be as low as Ghana's 17% ratio; but weak national economies have produced huge rates of graduate unemployment, compelling oftentimes the formation of Unemployed Graduate Associations.

Agencies

Broadly, the situation may have contributed to quick fixes by individuals and institutions, as well as frequent ethical breaches in education such as examination malpractice, grade inflation, forgery of university admission letters, moral laxity in student-lecturer interaction, sale of lecture notes by faculty, sale of graduate theses, and several related vices whose outcomes may give a false impression of individual or institutional excellence. In 2005, the University of Ghana instituted a probe into a gradual surge of first class degrees from an average of 3% in 1970s and 80s to a phenomenal 12% from 2000 onwards, and attributed this to factors other than a remarkably improved institutional profile. This led to the identification of possible causes, vulnerable departments, etc. and the institution of measures to arrest the situation. This and other immediate breaches culminated in the institution of an international visitation panel in 2006.

The panel was tasked to review the University's governance and administrative structures, academic programs as well as infrastructure, which in itself signaled the Univ3rsity's concern for global standards. The visitation panel was made up of 16 scholars and administrators from Africa, Europe, USA, South America, Asia, and the West Indies. And they brought to bear in their 118 recommendations, best practices from universities throughout the world, in seeking to bring the University of Ghana abreast with acceptable international norms. The wide scope of recommendations made constituted the University's renewed guiding principles, and have since led to an appreciable restoration of standards. The University's ranking recently moved from 15th to 8th in Africa, including North and Southern Africa. In 2013, the Chairman of the Visitation Panel, Sir John Daniel, was awarded an honorary doctorate degree by the University of Ghana.

But if weak institutional systems have yielded breaches in ethics within higher education, this has been aggravated by weak support systems outside the University setting, where parents have condoned and even sponsored breaches of ethical regulations.

There have been innumerable cases of parents who have taken the initiative to obtain forged certificates for innocent children and wards, who did not make the minimum grade for admission to Universities and other tertiary institutions. I have seen 17year old girls wailing and sobbing in police cells for malpractices initiated by parents. Also

common are situations where guardians have freely given moneys to their wards to buy allegedly leaked examination questions.

Poisoning the Value Chain

A very worrying factor is often the domino effect ethical breaches and associated publicized scandals, have had on systems to which culprit universities belong. These could be affiliation and mentoring systems, as well as the University's international networks. In countries where there is a system of affiliation and mentoring, requiring new universities to get affiliated to public universities for over specified periods before autonomy is granted, the weakening of a mentoring university's integrity credentials, may taint the image of all its formal networks and affiliates, and shatter their integrity.

Even in the absence of such networking and affiliation schemes, universities by their very nature as potential sites for internationalization, are fertile areas for epidemics of academic corruption across nations, undermining the several advantages brought on by internationalization, namely broadening the scope of institutions, promotion of cross cultural harmony, enrichment of social and cultural life, and promotion of diversity.

Mistrust

These advantages however, can be eroded by a crisis of mistrust on the basis of a perceived deficit in integrity, which can weaken, poison or collapse the value chain. This has the potential of subverting

student mobility and processes of harmonization of degrees. In developing economies like Africa's, this may nip innovative infant institutions in the bud.

Indeed, the foremost challenges facing higher education harmonization in West Africa include: gender and cultural disparities, the mismatch between skills and industry requirements, diverse admission criteria, the absence of credit transfer arrangements (locally, regionally and internationally) and most importantly here, poor recognition of African qualifications externally. Overall, African higher education has been viewed with a suspicion that weakens its competitive edge internally as well as externally. The reasons for the anxiety may be diverse, but may include a perception of low quality and weak quality assurance protocols, and in some cases a conscious blacklisting of certain countries, considered rightly or wrongly, as sites for low levels of academic integrity.

But signals of mistrust in Africa's higher education are evident in several other ways, including a skewed pattern of scholar and student mobility. The expected outcomes could be partly envisioned in current trends in global migration, within the education sector.

Skewed Migration Trends

In the area of academic migration of students worldwide, Africa has been projected as a site to watch for student mobility across the globe,

after India. African students are estimated to be 10% of the world's international students. And which are the typical destinations for academic migration by Africans? France has been cited as the foremost destination for Africans, followed by South Africa, then UK or USA. UK and USA absorb about 9% each of African Students in motion.

African students have sought university education abroad sometimes to widen their intellectual and social horizon. At the graduate level, however, students have sought to make themselves more competitive for the job market, and tend to think that education abroad would give them a competitive edge, as well as access to a prosperous global job market.

One-Way Mobility
Where study abroad is through institutional MOUs, shorter periods of stay have been the expected norm; for such MOU's offer sandwich opportunities, where students spend up to a year abroad, and return home to complete their academic work, obtaining the local degree. Where individual arrangement has been made for study abroad, African students spend full terms obtaining a degree either at the undergraduate or post graduate level.

The situation however changes with student mobility from other continents to Africa. Whether mobility is through formal or individual arrangement, North-South mobility to Africa is significantly for

shorter periods, and no effort is made to obtain a degree from a sub-Saharan African University for a student coming from other continents outside Africa.

Foreign students from US, Europe etc. who come to Africa for graduate or doctoral work, come mostly as visiting students, who get affiliated with the University while doing research or field work in Ghana, and take the opportunity to use the University library, as well as consult faculty in relevant fields of expertise. Hardly is Africa accessed for full term graduate education by the North.

Flash Visits

In a few unusual cases, Euro-American Universities seeking a taste of Africa, have sought to bring down their own instructors to teach their students on the African soil and return. Here no intellectual resources in Africa are used. Africa is regrettably used ostensibly as a class desk, or retreat site, and unethically cited by institutions to earn credit for diversification, cross cultural education and global outreach. Other times students only express interest in communal labor in communities, as an equivalent of their academic taste of Africa.

On the other hand, where foreign students immigrate from other African countries, they enroll as full time students, take entire courses over 4 year periods if they are undergraduates, and receive the degrees of the relevant African university.

Perception of Low Standards

But why should students from other continents, spend full terms in Africa earning a degree, when global rankings in higher education, dismally portray Universities in Africa?

I returned from a conference in Oxford in 2017, where Oxford was virtually jubilating their placement as the Number One University in the world, in one of the current university rankings.

What is the story of African Universities on global rankings? First, of the six continents of Africa, Europe, Asia, North America, South America, Australia, Africa in 2017 was the only continent not represented in neither the best 100, nor the best 200 nor the best 300 universities in the world in some rankings. All others, Australia, North America, South America, Asia, Europe, were represented.

The No 1 University in Africa, is placed in some world rankings as No. 303. The number 1 university in Sub Saharan Africa is also ranked as No. 1032 in the world. The University that ranked number 100 in Africa, is ranked globally as number 3419.

Only 7 universities in Africa sometimes fall within the best 1000 universities in the world.

This skewed pattern of student and scholar mobility, or rather the inequitable pattern of scholarly exchange, and predictably low ratings, should be of concern particularly if they can be traced to perceived

low standards, or egregious lapses in academic integrity.

Caveat

Even though the worldwide rankings are not necessarily the most reliable in measuring academic standards, the geographical distribution of universities in the top, middle, and bottom brackets, should give one a sense of considerable inequality between universities in Africa, and the rest of the world. Within Africa itself there is a sharp schism in perceived standards, between universities in South Africa and Northern Africa on one hand, and those in the typical sub-Saharan Africa, described as North of the Limpopo river. The latter are poorly perceived and placed in terms of infrastructure, human resources, and academic output.

The limited academic migration to Sub Saharan African universities, should clearly then be seen within the broad global perceptions, which also feed into the general architecture of migration, and the perception of quality and ethical standards.

Bulwark Against Immorality

But by and large, while there is a measure of mistrust for ethics and systems governing African higher education, Africa has also blamed internationalization and globalization as responsible for rapid decline of moral values in Higher Education, and the onset of cultural practices that are inimical to African values.

In highly religious countries like Ghana, parents have sometimes sought to rescue their wards from social vices by exercising preference for higher education institutions where academic excellence is founded on sound morality and spirituality.

The private sector has responded to this with a proliferation of faith-based tertiary institutions, and the infusion of spirituality within the social life of students in secular universities, thereby offering options to suit student preferences. Moral training has therefore become a marketing tool for African universities that seek the attention of students and concerned parents. The following mottos and guiding principles advertised by Universities in Ghana, point in this direction:

Integri Procedamus, (We are committed to integrity).

Excellence, Morality, Service

Faith Integrity Excellence

Empowered to Serve

Truth our Guide

May the light of knowledge and wisdom shine forth;

Moral Uprightness, Academic Excellence, and the Passion to Serve

References to moral virtues in the guiding principles and visions of Universities seek to convey assurances about the university's

commitment to combining academic excellence with the inculcation of moral values.

Where moral virtues have not been emphasized, knowledge and leadership have been foregrounded, to convey a university's obligation to address a felt deficit in Africa's leadership profile.

Integrity Models

Remarkably, one Christian university, Central University, has established an Institute, named after a notable statesman and nationalist, William Ofori Attah, a quintessential example of honesty and righteousness in political leadership. He was educated at Basel missionary schools and seminaries. A devout Christian, he brought to Ghanaian politics the principles of sincerity, honesty and integrity, and was indeed a morality crusader par excellence. In 2011, Central University, Ghana's biggest private university, established a William Ofori Attah Institute of Leadership and Integrity, to commemorate the principles and virtues 'Paa Willie' stood for. An annual lecture series was established by the Institute where academics of high integrity were invited to speak on selected aspects of ethics and morality.

Honor Code

Perhaps the most remarkable example in the inculcation of morality is the institution of an Honor Code at Ashesi University in Ghana. This

is a Code, to which all students are required by regulation, to swear at the University's matriculation ceremony, pledging sound morality, and the avoidance of examination malpractice. In the words of the official Ashesi University catalogue,

> *The adoption of the Examination Honour Code marks a significant step in the history of Ashesi University. The code is intended to build a high-trust community, to put students in charge of their ethical posture and the reputation of their alma mater, and by so doing, to take a significant step in Ashesi's mission to educate a new generation of ethical leaders in Africa.*

The effectiveness of the Honor Code makes examinations self-regulatory, and invigilation at exams completely redundant. Examinations therefore take place without invigilators, and without fear of exam infringement; for it is not only a breach of the code to actively engage in an exam malpractice, but also to be a passive witness to an infraction observed. Not to report an examination malpractice amounts to condoning the offense, for which collective sanctions may be applied.

The system has helped in producing talented students with a high sense of morality at Ashesi University. Along with other factors, such as innovative teaching, experiential modes of knowledge acquisition, and the immersion of industry in academic work, products of Ashesi are currently in very high demand by industry both within and outside Ghana.

Fake Credentials

African nations have promoted high standards in tertiary education, through regulatory institutions set up by the state, such as National Accreditation Boards, National Council for Tertiary Education, mentoring academic institutions, and various professional bodies such the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences. But universities also have codes of ethics for students, faculty and staff, and sometimes conduct seminars on sexual harassment for newly appointed faculty. In Ghana, religious and moral education is a compulsory subject in basic school, from primary to Junior High School.

The National Accreditation Board each year has drawn the attention of the general public to institutions accredited to operate, as well as unaccredited institutions illegally operating in the country. The latter have often been clamped down and proprietors arrested, to sanitize the higher education terrain.

In a few instances, the Accreditation Board has drawn attention to fake international degree awarding organizations that do not have accreditation licenses, yet continue to award degrees to the unsuspecting public.

A 2016 crackdown by the Ghana's National Accreditation Board on fake degree holders in universities, pointed accusing fingers to four institutions in Europe and USA, which either did not exist or did not have accreditation to operate in Ghana and may have fraudulently granted honorary and doctoral degrees to some Ghanaians, including eminent public personalities and academics in Ghana. This came about after two Ghanaian scholars in USA, produced a widely publicized report on accreditation challenges in transnational education, in which they point to several unaccredited institutions worldwide that were granting fake degrees. This led to considerable public anxiety, particularly when eminent personalities, high ranking public personalities, politicians and notable academics were named.

The matter was somehow laid to rest by the National Accreditation Board, which clarified the situation and pointed to specific periods over which some of the accreditations had lapsed. Consequently, some of the named fake degree holders had no option but to quietly drop the titles in self-reference.

Such incidents could multiply due to the current proliferation of phony distance learning programs, and the onset of an agenda in several African universities, where non-doctoral faculty are either being flushed out, or given limited contracts. This has led to a rush for doctoral degrees obtainable within the shortest possible time, and the victimization of anxious applicants.

But there are even more serious breaches in the use of fake academic honorifics, to which regulatory bodies have been slow to react.

Credentials Abuse

It is my humble suggestion that professional bodies, associations and academies should rise to the occasion and reinforce compliance with academic norms and standards. Academies where necessary, should not shy away from such advocacies seeking to restore decorum to their professions. Dabbling in public controversy in the pursuit of high academic standards is exactly what is expected of intellectuals the world over. Even more radically, the intellectual, should be someone whose vision is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the carpet.

I have in mind here the opportunity we have as professional bodies, to boldly repudiate the gross misuse, abuse and sometimes the fraudulent uses of academic titles and academic honors, by impostors, and academic charlatans. I refer indeed to the current explosion of titles, honors, and awards of dubious quality and provenance. The current proliferation of titles could indeed trigger a major devaluation of honors and academic credentials in Africa. Some of the titles, particularly those purported to be international, turn out to be nothing but phony street side commodities that are subject to normal price negotiation and payment. Indeed, the

awards and honors industry is now a lucrative business, which has found fertile grounds in the local penchant for pomp and pageantry; and it should be the duty of major stakeholders, and professional bodies to undertake periodic intervention.

Controversies

The issue has been compounded by the public's reverence for academic titles, and the assumed capacity of lofty epithets to expedite one's rise to fame and political power. There is indeed a general perception that high academic laurels of an aspirant to political office, could enhance his or her credibility and capacity to canvass for local and national development. Public controversy has often been raised when doubtful academic credentials have been paraded by public officials in their official resumes. Sometimes the claim is openly contested by well-meaning critics and public spirited individuals seeking to set records straight.

It is indeed a pity that professional bodies have looked on, and not intervened to salvage the beleaguered knowledge industry.

Indeed, the prevalence of fraud and falsehood in the use of academic titles is partly due to the absence of regulatory frameworks strictly enforced by accredited bodies or professional associations, seeking to set standards and guidelines. The silence of professional bodies over the misapplication of honorifics, has wrought complete chaos in

the ordering and meaning of titles, as well as their social applications. The chaotic deployment and stringing of epithets only devalues the discipline of title investiture, blurs the distinction between mediocrity and excellence, and deprives society of opportunities to isolate its cherished values. In the realm of academia, it compromises the quest for excellence and subverts the exacting standards set by society to recognize its best brains.

The display of Intellectual dishonesty, through the acquisition of false titles and accolades, can thus be considered a blatant attempt to undermine social ideals, that are founded on a time tested reward system that is performance driven. If hard work and excellence are applauded by society, it is also because lofty honors are not haphazardly conferred; indeed, titles and laurels are most enduring if bestowed by accredited individuals and institutions of high esteem.

Joining Hands

But the call is also for educational institutions, alumni, parents, students, and staff alike to join hands in collectively eliminating academic vices; for that is the only way university degrees can regain or rather improve their national and international value. An institution's reputation can only be partly inherited; it needs to be continuously massaged and sustained through the institution's own internal processes and mechanisms, including good and competent

leadership, programs, disciplinary codes, as well as a dynamic human resource base, that is abreast with a fast changing world.