Benchmark Journals

Academic Ethics and Integrity: Rebuilding Trust in the Nigerian Higher Educational System

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One of the oldest professions in the world is the academics. Academic is used to describe a school, college, or university that places emphasis on studying and reasoning with technical skills. An academia is a member of a university or college community who teaches any or does research. Though it has evolved and expanded over time, its core values have remained. Anyone engaged in higher education research according to Petrina and Ross (2014) encounters a paradox: never in human history has higher education been so widespread in its reach and global significance and at no greater time in history has more persons enrolled in tertiary education. At the same time, even as the centrality and importance of academic research, teaching and knowledge exchange has grown, the relative status of the academic profession has suffered a precipitous decline. This paradox of the simultaneous growth and decline in status of the academic profession has been very stark in Nigeria. As the significance and demand for higher education in Nigeria has grown exponentially, the public trust in the entire educational architecture has plummeted. The privilege and prestige that academics in Nigeria once enjoyed has eroded rapidly. The nation is now faced with the reality of commonising the academic profession in Nigeria.

The concern about the academic profession is obviously entangled with the massification of higher education and its attendant manifestations (Petrina & Ross, 2014). With rising participation rates in higher education and slower investment in improving the educational infrastructure, the quality of education and its practice in Nigeria is called into question as stakeholders raise concerns over failing standards. The brewing crisis of confidence in higher education in Nigeria stems from falling educational standards, ethical infractions and integrity of the academics.

Many of the conditions affecting the academic profession in developing countries like Nigeria are issues of massification, accountability, privatization, and marketization also affect universities and academics from other nations to differing degrees. Massification has led, among other things, to an expanded academic profession and an academic community that is increasingly fragmented. Accountability has limited the traditional autonomy of the profession, more tightly regulating academic work and eroding one of the major attractions of the academic profession. Privatization has, in some contexts, placed pressure on academics to generate income for themselves and for the university through consulting and other nonteaching activities. Marketization has forced academics to become more aware of students' curricular interests. Professors have also been encouraged to engage in entrepreneurial activities. The sad fact in the era of mass higher education is that the conditions of academic work have, for most academics, deteriorated everywhere (Teferra & Philip, 2002).

Ethics and Integrity: Teaching, in Higher Education

Teaching is considered a profession that is endowed with a great deal of trust and high moral standards of behaviour. In fact, there is an expectation of higher standards of ethical behaviour among teachers. Such a calling of "higher" moral standards, as accepted by Campbell (2003), may point to a high level of moral standards in comparison with other professions. The very nature of the profession, where teachers are expected to work necessitates that they conduct themselves morally in the professional sphere, and also in their personal sphere of influence. It is not an exaggeration to point out that as a professional; teachers are engaged in one of the most ethically demanding jobs (Clark, 2004). Teaching in higher education is becoming an increasingly complex occupation with the explosion of knowledge in this information age. As one of the main gatekeepers of knowledge, teachers have the responsibility not only to keep abreast with new information, but also to integrate it meaningfully in the learning environment of the students. Another factor that adds to the complexity of teaching in higher education is the interactive nature of the work of faculty (Prema, 2011). The demand for teaching, innovations and development from the academic environment is required at a higher rate. Teaching in higher education may not be at the required standard. According to Whitchurch and Gordon (2009) there are additional roles and responsibilities as well as leadership responsibilities placed on academic today. This is as a result of modernization of higher education to meet new expectations.

This changing scenario necessitates the need for a clearer understanding of professional behaviours and practices in the human relationship aspect of higher education. While it is true that a great number of teachers do carry out their responsibilities with sincerity and integrity, there are cases of malpractices from time to time that relates to unethical practices such as seeking inappropriate favours and "life-less" teaching just to fulfill an obligation. Institutions of higher education share the responsibility, along with agencies such as family, schools and religion to promote individual and societal integrity and values. Particularly, this responsibility falls heavily on the lecturers, who are to model high ethical standards and behaviours (Prema, 2011). However, lecturers themselves have been caught in the web of academic fraud, showing signs of lacking in integrity and upholding ethics of their profession and of the society. Issues of academia convicted of sexual assaults or caught in "sex for marks" or "money for marks" has also dented the image of the profession in Nigeria. One must state clearly that these have been isolated cases accentuated by the overwhelming voices of the society demanding for accountability and integrity from education. It is a known fact that there are hardworking academia all over Nigeria, who are putting in their best to move higher education forward.

Teaching in higher education comes with a great deal of academic freedom for teachers-curriculum design, expression, research, teaching methods (Macfarlane, 2004). Such privileges come with important responsibilities which include the practice of integrity and ethics in one's profession. It cannot be denied as well that the failures of the academic profession to recognize the implications of these developments have equally contributed to the interesting times amidst which many lecturers and academics find themselves today. However, much of the changes and declining trust in the educational system and fortunes of academics in Nigeria is also as a result globalization and changing societal demands.

The Relationship between Social Change and the Issues of Ethics in the Higher Education System

The relationship between society and education has been that of demand and supply. It involves demands from society on the higher education system and the system's response. The society places a demand on education to train and transmit civilization to its people, while also looking at education to shape responses in the environment. Social conditions are affected by the spheres of politics, economics, science and technology. The structural transformation of higher education determines the interaction between social change and issues in education systems where students can gain knowledge to transform the society (Maurice & Ulrich, 2007). The quality of the graduates produced through the Nigerian training system has been an issue of open debate and concern to stakeholders. This, to a great extent, is shaping the perception of members of the society with respect to standards of education and the integrity of academics in Nigeria.

On the other hand, Maurice & Ulrich (2007) stated that higher education also serves as a vehicle for influencing society, including a conservative function which reproduces social relations and an innovative function which reforms them, this the educational system is failing to fulfill. Report and perceive cases of deteriorating ethics and standards between and among educators, fraud and personal misconducts has worsened the image of academics in Nigeria. This is in addition to the unconscionable acts, spread of popular culture and indecent acts from campuses to the society. From indecent dressing and promiscuity, to the record number of university students perpetuating internet fraud in Nigeria. The questions are, was education developed to train graduates with indecent characters? Where students not supposed to graduate in character and in learning? How come they are failing on their attitudes? It gets worse, when lecturers themselves are caught either aiding or participating in these acts themselves. Higher education in Nigeria, by failing to initiate positive changes in society and not standing up to the pressure from society is in a crisis of confidence, with a direct bearing on the standards and the integrity of its profession.

The Relationship between Globalization and the Issues of Ethics in the Higher Education System

With respect to education, globalisation according to Altbach (2000) refers to trends in higher education that have cross-national implications, such as student markets, internet based technologies, the global knowledge economy and massification of higher education. Globalization and the diffusion of information and knowledge have made learning easier and not necessary within the four walls of the university. Knowledge can be acquired virtually and applied actually. The effect of globalization on the education system in Nigeria has been profound. The fluid borders mean one can take advantage of education from universities outside their home countries with better facilities and offerings. The internalization of education has put most Nigerian universities at a disadvantage. This is in terms of their curriculum, programmes and administration in a bid to retain local students and attract foreign students. None of which they seem to be very effective at. The volume of movements of students in search for education outside of Nigeria has increased rapidly as middle income households' rise. This may be dwarfed by higher enrollment rates as a result of massification, however, there is no denying that there is a perceived failure of Nigerian academics to impart the skills needed for participation in the knowledge economy.

Lowering academic standards has been one key issue raised by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the umbrella body for university academics in Nigeria. The process of rebuilding trust in the educational system of Nigeria will be long and hard. This will begin with addressing the foundational issues of ethics in the academic profession and how members of staff will uphold the ethics and standards of their profession. The environmental and institutional framework to support growth, both academic and personal growth must be put in place. Only then, can the focus now turn to reviewing educational curriculum to meet national and international objectives. A framework for rebuilding trust in academics as adapted from the Edelman Trust Barometer 2014 is presented here.

INTEGRITY

i. Upholds ethical professional practice
ii. Takes responsible action to address issues or crisis
iii. Maintains transparent and open academic practice

ENGAGEMENT

i. Listens to society/students' needs and feedback
ii. Employee/student welfare inclined
iii. Places value above profits
iv. Communicates frequently and honestly about the state of the institution

PRODUCTS & SERVICES

a. Offer up-to-date educational programmes and curriculum
b. Building character, ethics and integrity in students
c. Leading in research and development

PURPOSE

a. Works to protect and improve the environment
b. Address society's need as its core value
c. Creates programmes that positively affect the community they serve and the society at large
d. Explores partnerships with NGOs, industries and Governments to proffer solutions to society's challenges

OPERATIONS

   i. Has an effective leadership and administrative structure

   ii. Commitment to excellence, progressiveness and upward mobility in educational rankings

   iii. Delivers consistent and higher returns on social investment

The adapted Trust Barometer lists five clusters of 16 attributes that are keys in building trust: integrity, engagement, products and services, purpose and operations. The university must take into account its major responsibilities of research, teaching, creation and transfer of knowledge. Furthermore, higher education as a whole must answer to society, institutions, such as industries and governments as well as students. In its responsibility to the society, higher education should provide high quality and specialized knowledge. This entails, creating this knowledge, transmitting and teaching this knowledge and awakening interest in it among students and society. In the case of public universities, it is required that they meet their social responsibilities. Thus, higher education institutions should be accountable to government.

With respect to organizations, businesses and associations that has shown fidelity and trust in the professional and human training offered to students of the higher education institution. There is the necessity to guarantee that training and certification received by the students at the institution is effective at the level necessary to resolve the problems that professionals educated by the university must face(Casado & do Céu Patrão (2018).

To students, Casado and do Céu Patrão (2018) admonished that the higher education institutions must provide rigorous and up to date technical knowledge and content. Students are to be taught and helped to think critically and autonomously. Essentially, it must offer students a complete education, helping students graduate in character and in learning and to partake in societal development by applying the skills learnt in solving social issues.

Lastly, through educational benchmarking practices, the university must evaluate itself, ensuring that it fulfills its mission. Essentially, the university must answer to its self.

Conclusion

The process of re-evaluating ethical practices and integrity in higher education for rebuilding trust in academics is the task of every academic. Stakeholders all agree that there is a brewing crisis of confidence in the educational sector of Nigeria. While the focus has been on revitalization of public universities and welfare, the issue of ethics, standards and rebuilding trust should shape academic conduct going forward. The process of cleaning up and rebuilding begins with academics and will also be measured by their responses to the issues bedeviling the sector. The battered image of higher education and academics in Nigeria can only be restored when the issue of the value of education, its practice, the ethics and standards of the academic profession are reviewed, delineated, fully adhered and propagated to by academics.

Suggestions

1. Rebuilding the image of higher education in Nigeria requires definite steps to support the academia, especially in both sensitizing and equipping them in ethics related to the profession of teaching.

2. The Edelman Trust Barometer 2014 model for rebuilding trust should be adapted by higher education institutions to rebuild the ethical foundations of institutions in Nigeria.

3. University administrators in Nigeria should foster a culture of accountability as well as the evaluation of the quality of the teaching and research activities going on in their communities.
4. It is also pertinent that universities support the engagement in professional development related to ethics, new industry /occupational standards as well as personal development initiatives.

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