Academic Integrity & Culture Sensitivity

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WHITE PAPER: Academic Integrity & Culture Sensitivity
HINTS AND PATHWAY TO THE FUTURE

Centre for Academic Integrity Research & Anti-Plagiarism
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1.0 Introduction

This paper is both a gentle reminder and a honesty caution that we; all Nigerian institutions of learning in general, ought to be sure that we get the whole idea of academic integrity right and make the project a success by many standards; introduction, implementation, management and all else.

As a reminder, each time we embark on a path of change we need to ensure that we gauge our intentions against our current position in order to make efficient use of our time and resources or if change doesn’t happen when we could have made it happen in spite of all resources, the experience would be worse than a waste.

The Committee of Vice Chancellors of Nigerian Universities had blazed the trail and initiated the change when in 2012 she contacted the UK based academic integrity software company called TURNITIN for discussions and technical collaboration. Today virtually all (if not all) universities in Nigeria have access to the TURNITIN system and they can now check to know very closely some of the sources of plagiarism amongst the Nigerian students.

While the move by the CVCs was a giant stride, we need to be careful not to lose sight of the exemplary leadership of the honourable body. The Nigerian academe needs to consolidate on that move of the CVC to ensure that the practice is correctly introduced, well implemented and managed. This is the whole crux of this paper.
This present paper derives from first hand local knowledge of academic integrity climate in Nigerian institutions, coupled with rich international experience of academic integrity from the perspectives of tutors and students, along with current research works and privileged information about the ongoing academic integrity project in the Nigeria universities. It shares very valuable information about what it considers (based on experience and information) to be the right approach to the introduction, implementation and management of academic integrity in Nigeria.

Therefore, this paper is able to argue that while most students and faculty members may know the meaning of academic integrity and plagiarism, the concept and practice are grossly understated or totally misunderstood among many students and lecturers. Academic integrity includes a lot more of several basics of academic honesty than what is required under examination or assessment conditions. It is very inappropriate to misconstrue academic dishonesty as examination malpractice alone. It’s like interpreting the word sin to mean stealing and killing alone; excluding other more common types of sins such as lying, anger and hatred.

The concept and practice of academic integrity seems to be completely foreign to the Nigerian institutions even to such an extent that some scholars misrepresent the concept in their publications. Therefore, creating climate of academic integrity in the Nigerian institutions is equivalent to making a major cultural change. The effort and attention it deserves are much more than a once-for-all, automatic or quick-fix solution. The route to this process of change is one that requires gradual, systematic and repeated efforts; all directed more towards correcting wrong perception than
instituting strict disciplinary measures. Disciplinary measures should only become compulsory and widespread in situations of flagrant violation of correct and adequate knowledge of rules and regulations already existing and embed in a system.

Beyond providing information and practical leads that would enhance efficient deployment of resources and manpower for the academic integrity project, this paper includes information about collaborative and networking opportunities, which are available to the Nigerian academic institutions for ensuring genuine and sustainable climate of holistic integrity (academic, professional and social) in their communities.

Lastly but most importantly, the aim of this paper is to advocate for the creation of workable, locally designed academic integrity policies and intervention strategies that would first of all consider the current precarious culture and wrong paradigm of academic integrity in Nigeria. The approach to a culture of academic integrity and its management should be based on sustainable positive practices such as widespread knowledge, the honor code system, collective vigilance and institutional evaluation. These are the routes to voluntary compliance and enshrined integrity.

2.0 Really! What is Academic Integrity?

Many of the existing studies on academic integrity seek to unravel what seems to be like a mystery in plagiarism; they often ask the question and so does this paper “why do students plagiarize?” Answering this question helps the paper explain academic
integrity in ways that its meaning would not be lost within context.

Truly research has shown that the reasons for plagiarism vary across culture; and for Nigeria, the reason is “there is just no reason not to plagiarize. Even until now, it is not certain if there are documented and popular academic integrity policies in Nigeria; either for the faculty members or the students. So the rule guiding academic integrity and anti-plagiarism in the Nigerian institutions are pretty much psychological. The faculty and students know and they agree that plagiarism is an offence but many of them have not seen the documented declaration, let alone signed a copy by themselves or other colleagues in their community.

However, some institutions have examination malpractices policies and undertakings signed by students. Judging by what is available from those institutions, it is obvious that the only known and most punished example of plagiarism in Nigeria is examination malpractices. This grossly undermines the true meaning of academic integrity and limiting plagiarism to cheating in tests and examinations alone is a gruesome compromise on the meaning and importance of the concept. It is also unacceptable in the true sense of it.

3.0 The Focus: Plagiarism or Integrity?

To begin with, it is good to clarify the motive behind the current project of academic integrity in most of the Nigerian universities. Did the committee of Vice Chancellors, when she contacted TURITIN last year, intend to secure a system that would enable the universities to
spot and punish acts of examination malpractices on their campuses? Or was the intention to help the universities create a climate of integrity and a new order of morality in their communities?

It was probably the latter but surely not the former. If that was it, then there is far more to be done than securing TURNITIN access for the universities. If the universities intend to use the plagiarism detection software effectively, efficiently and fairly, then all the faculty members and students of the over one hundred and forty (140) universities should first of all be equipped with the most important academic integrity information; the complete guidelines to citation and referencing. This needs to become very popular among faculty and students.

According to Orim et al (2012), “some of the lecturers and administrators of Nigerian universities think there is no case of plagiarism on their campuses”. This sounds very ridiculous but logically true; it is a confirmation of the cliché “where there are no rules, there also is no offense”. If there are no clearly defined rules for citation and referencing, then it is right to say there is no plagiarism. Plagiarism is only a violation of a set of ‘known’ rules and regulations (that is, honest and correct citation and referencing) for academic writing.

Going forward, emphasis should be on the guidelines for practicing academic integrity. These guidelines need to become very popular amongst faculty members and students; everybody needs to become aware and have easy access to the complete rules of citation and referencing. Then they may choose between obeying and breaking the rules. Of course, it is not news that
rules will surely be broken by those who will break them but not until then are they truly guilty; not until then should the institutions worry much about stopping plagiarism of a kind that is deliberate and born out of informed intentions, not ignorance or misunderstanding.

What is currently cited as examples of plagiarism in Nigerian institutions is outright cheating in assessments and examination; this is an extreme example of gross plagiarism. To illustrate it further, if plagiarism is likened to an act of lying, then cheating in assessment and examination is like murder. Therefore, plagiarism-detection software alone cannot stop examination malpractices just the same way a lie-detector machine alone cannot eradicate murder.

Creating a climate of integrity anywhere in Nigeria (academic institutions, religious communities and professional circles) is a major cultural change. However, cultural inclinations are usually well entrenched, either for good or bad and they cannot be done away with like used clothes” (Katzenbach, Steffen & Kronley, 2012). Practicing academic integrity in the Nigerian institutions requires making the guidelines very popular first of all and above all else. Promoting the desired result while simultaneously providing for deterrence would be very helpful in reducing all forms of dishonesty in the Nigerian academic communities but doing otherwise may seem like the cart before the horse.

Naturally it would amount to countering valuable efforts if preparations and provisions promote what is undesired more than the desired. Academic institutions in Nigeria need to collectively put academic integrity (not plagiarism or even its prevention) in the spotlight.
Much more emphasis should be on conquering ignorance of the construct by spreading the knowledge of citation and referencing than on merely providing for how to discipline ignorant violation.

4.0 Current Research & Implications

Some authors have argued that academic integrity is rooted in the Western culture and its individualistic tendencies (Hayes & Introna, 2005), but what they did not clarify is whether or not the opposite is a defining character of certain other people. However, what is apparent is that dishonesty of any kind can be found almost anywhere and stopping it requires deliberate planning, careful execution and consistent evaluation.

O’Connor (2003) describes the outcome of an extensive research across six universities in Australia using some 1925 essays submitted to TURNITIN and the findings were interesting. “Only a small amount of copying is ever detected by the software; turnitin does not cover most textbooks, journals and paper mill’ (O’Connor, 2003) and it does all else but does not discover plagiarism (Ellis, 2013). It generates similarity reports which must first be interpreted by the lecturers (who must understand the rules of citation and referencing very well) in order to establish a case of plagiarism.

Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes, & Armstead (1996) in their work, ‘Individual Differences in Students Cheating’ concluded that students who scored highly on moral reasoning tests
did not engage in cheating as much as their low-scoring counterparts. Furthermore, research has also established that academic dishonest behaviour is more common among students who judge cheating leniently than students who do not (Jensen, Arnett, Jeffrey, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2002).

From the foregoing, it can be implied that plagiarism is what it is; a behavioural construct and a moral offense against the body of knowledge but what does this imply for a group of students who do not know let alone understand the details of what is considered wrong or right in this regard? Like any other practical skills, academic writing skills have to be taught and allowed to develop gradually over time while discipline also evolves gradually.

According to Orim, Glendinning & Davies (2012) in their study of some Nigerian postgraduate students studying in the UK; they observed that the impact of very low level of awareness of academic writing amongst the students was principally responsible for their acts of plagiarism. The authors added that the “fear of not understanding the underlying concepts of proper academic writing and possible unintentional plagiarism” was a common concern amongst the Nigerian students who were studying at some postgraduate levels in the UK institution.

However, focusing on in-textuality (in-text citation) as a way of familiarising students with academic integrity skills, Perry (2004) posited that difficulty with writing in general (including academic writing), makes students (native and foreign English speaking alike) more vulnerable to the charge of plagiarism as they struggle with the
skills required to express themselves (critiquing, quoting, summarizing, paraphrasing et cetera) in the midst of statements made and conclusions reached by other writers.

By this paper and given the relative lack of awareness amongst many students and faculty members about academic writing, Nigerian institutions are implored to approach this very important change project perhaps in phases but anatomically, following the core elements of integrity policy; Access, Approach, Responsibility, Detail and Support (East, 2009). The reason is not far-fetched; an “overarching commitment to a culture of integrity in academics lies at the heart of an exemplary policy” (Bretag, Mahmud, Wallace, Walker & James, 2011) and its implementation.

5.0 The Centre for Academic Integrity

This paper is at the instance of a Nigerian Non-Governmental Organization registered as the Centre for Academic Integrity, Research and Anti-plagiarism (CAIRA). CAIRA is an initiative of a niche but growing private business school; International School of Management (ISM), Lagos. ISM was founded in 2006 as a training and advisory company which transformed into a business school approved by the Federal Ministry of Education.

ISM is the Nigerian partner of the Laureate Online Education, The Netherland. The school is responsible for the online student admission and support for Nigerians studying with the University of Liverpool, England; Walden University, USA;
Roehampton University, UK and Glion Institute of Higher Education, Switzerland.

Through the preaching and practice of a holistic integrity that will enable academic communities in Nigeria imbibe ethical and global best practices which will position them as the most transformed and enviable examples of integrity in the academic, professional and social lives of their members; the vision of CAIRA is a dream Nigeria that is the most academically honest, culturally improved and socially transformed society in Africa.

CAIRA will only achieve this noble objective if the Nigerian academic institutions share in her dream and patronize her programmes. The organization intends to function by rallying and lobbying academic institutions to help create awareness amongst their students and faculty members and encourage them to participate in the following change oriented intervention programmes;

1. TRAINING & EDUCATION
2. CONFERENCES & SEMINARS
3. PUBLICATIONS & MEDIA RELATIONS
4. RESEARCH & ADVISORY
5. ALLIANCES & PARTNERSHIPS
6. EVALUATION & RECOGNITION

The organization has very resourceful local members and can boast of an enviable network of seasoned academic integrity professionals and organizations across the globe. All of these assets can only translate into valuable resources when explored by
the Nigerian academic institutions and the members of their community. CAIRA exists only for the good of the academic institutions, their faculties and students.

CAIRA and its owners wish to seize the opportunity of this paper to invite all the universities, polytechnics and colleges of education in Nigeria to come along on this noble journey of a life time. This offer presents for everyone that would get involved, yet another opportunity to change lives and change the Nigerian society. Just if it succeeds, this would be the beginning of the re-writing of the story of a people made possible by the academe.

Whether it succeeds or not, whatever efforts were made genuinely and tirelessly would never have been wasted as it would surely be mentioned in the record of history. And surely history would be written again and again, whether of the rising of those who dared to make a change or of the falling of the indifferent others.

6.0 Recommendations/Conclusion

Many commentators argue (rightly so) that the level of dishonesty in the Nigerian academic institutions is a reflection of the societal decadence but more often they are oblivious of the roles of academic institutions in social transformation. For instance Universities have been said to have critical roles to play in some radical changes that involve “building of new civil society, in encouraging and facilitating new cultural
values and in training and socializing members of new social elites” (Brenan, King & Lebeau, 2004, p.7).

This paper advocates for the use of structured and cohesive intervention in the resolution of the problem of academic dishonesty across the Nigerian academic institutions. It relies on the recommendation of Perry (2004) to include the use of written guidelines, structured examples and exercises of incremental difficulty, collaborative workshops and planned feedback system in designing the intervention programmes purposed for the desired change to occur.

CAIRA recommends a partnership with academic institutions by which an institution enlists maximum of two of its faculty and / or administrators (including a librarian preferably) with the organization. As the primary enlisted members, these representatives would be the integrity ambassadors in their respective universities and they would protect the interest of their institutions in all of CAIRA programmes. Their right and privileges will include access to relevant information and research about academic integrity, regular free tutorials and training, free workshops and seminars, technical support and advisory and discounted conference attendance.

CAIRA will not charge any institution for up to a maximum of two (2) enlisted members but may solicit for assistance towards programmes and conferences on occasional basis. Any membership in excess of the two free enlistments shall be fee paying members. Fee paying members have extra and special privileges which include election to the executive committee of the organisation.
CAIRA uses blended learning for its variety of teaching and training programmes thereby helping to extend her reach to a large number of people per time. This also ensures minimal disruptions to students’ school programmes or faculty members’ academic and personal commitments. The mix of the traditional face to face with e-learning and online real time platforms provides a variety of choices that members can choose from to partake in programmes. In all of these, no gap is created in learning.

The Nigerian Educational Research & Development Council (NERDC), UNESCO, USAID AND UK Education are part of the authoritative sources that online education is as effective (if not more in some cases) as the traditional campus-based classroom mode. Online and other virtual learning formats generally contribute to the development of efficient pedagogy which enhances academic integrity, individualised learning and cost-effectiveness while still ensuring steeper learning curves.

Finally, it is highly recommended that academic institutions introduce a compulsory but asynchronous zero unit course on academic writing skills which every student must complete and pass in two to three stages within their programmes. Postgraduate students (PGD and Masters) who had previously passed all stages could retake an abridge version of the examination once within their medium term programme. The administrative and academic modality of this policy is the resolve of individual institution but it sends strong signal to the institutions’ communities and the larger public about the decision of the authorities to make academic integrity a top priority on Nigerian campuses.
7.0 References


Orim, S-M, Glendinning, I., & Davies, J., (2012), ‘A Phenomenographic Exploration of the perception of plagiarism: Case Study of Nigerian students in a UK University, Coventry University UK.

WORDS ON THE MARBLE

It’s all about **YOU** and I
IF I WERE ON THE OTHER SIDE
I SHOULD SEE **YOU** FIRST
OTHERS INBETWEEN
AND I WOULD BE LAST

**CENTRE FOR ACADEMIC INTEGRITY, RESEARCH AND ANTI-PLAGIARISM (CAIRA)**
The International School of Management (ISM) Lagos
Plot 5 Yesuf Abiodun Street Oniru Road Victoria Island Lagos
+234 1 280 9336, +234 1 277 1223, +234 808 536 9898
Email: info@caira.org.ng Website: www.caira.org.ng