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Causes of academic dishonesty in institutions of higher learning

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Secondary school students during a past national examination. PHOTO | KEVIN ODIT | NMG

During the past weeks, Business Talk took a critical look at the quality of doctoral, master's, and bachelor's degree programs in Kenya and what prospective students should ask before starting a new course.

This week, however, we investigate the demand side of tertiary education rather than the demand side with a serious problem facing universities: student cheating.

Every fall when Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) results will soon be announced, parents sit in rapt attention as Ministry of Education officials announce any cheating scandals, disqualifications, or anomalies.

The prevalence of cheating in secondary schools holds lingering detrimental effects on students and society-at-large.

As an example, elite secondary schools in Kenya who sinisterly provide leakage to their students in order for them to pass KCSE reinforces that cheating is acceptable as long as one does not get caught.

Bernard Whitley Jr. and Patricia Keith-Spiegel disturbingly found that those who cheat in secondary school become more likely to cheat in university as well. So, students carry these perceptions on into university.

Researchers Diana Starovoytova and Milton Arimi found that 82 per cent of Kenyan public university students admit to cheating.

In which academic disciplines do students cheat the most? Researchers Donald McCabe, Kenneth Butterfield, and Linda Treviño found that graduate business students cheat at a higher rate than nonbusiness graduate students in the same universities.

Additionally, they discovered that the perceptions that students have about their fellow students drive a large part of their cheating behaviour.

Peter Ashworth, Philip Bannister, and Pauline Thorne highlight other factors that lead to more academic dishonesty including feelings of alienation from the university due to a lack of interaction with faculty, large class sizes, and emphasis on group learning over individual accomplishments.

Not surprisingly, social scientists Mark Brimble and Peta Stevenson-Clarke uncovered that university students held a higher tolerance of academic misconduct especially with regards to falsification of research results and plagiarism than do academic staff in colleges.

Also, faculty are extremely likely to underestimate the true extent of all forms of student cheating.

How should universities combat the scourge of student cheating? In particular, master's students in Kenya write a major dissertation or project at the completion of their graduate degree.

The study should represent a clear understanding of how to identify an industry problem or gap, determine how to measure the phenomenon, then analyse causes and effects of the issue with accompanying recommendations.

Employers need such analytical skills and approaches learning in graduate school that will lead to creative and innovative results in organisations.

The cheating vice does not just persist at the master's level. This author once sat in an interview for a prospective new faculty member and their just-completed PhD dissertation revolved around microfinance repayment rates in Kenya.

So as an interview panel member, I asked: “this is a fascinating topic, so what is the average repayment rate for Kenyan microfinance institutions?”. I was holding her dissertation in my hand and could see the answer, but she could not recall average repayment rate.

The simple question represented the whole crux of her dissertation and she did not even know it. Clearly, the PhD dissertation was plagiarised or written on her behalf by a ghostwriter.

Needless to say, we did not hire her. Also, in interviewing another lecturer candidate who held a big position at another university, one of my colleagues ran a plagiarism check on United States International University-Africa’s powerful software and found that the candidate’s entire PhD dissertation was copied from a doctoral candidate’s dissertation in India. We obviously did not offer him a job either.

Universities excitedly utilise anti-plagiarism software in the hopes of stopping cheating.

However, software alone is only part of the solution but is not comprehensive enough. Next week Business Talk will offer a concrete guide to faculty supervisors and university administrators on how to combat master’s degree cheating so that Kenyan businesses get the better-quality graduates that they deserve.