

**Academic Corruption in Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions**  
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**Abstract**

The focus of this study was to explore the experience of academic leaders and students on the practice of academic corruption and to suggest a workable area of improvement to curb the level of academic corruption in higher education institutions. To conduct this study, phenomenological research methodology through an in-depth interview with ten purposefully selected respondents and document analysis was employed. In line with this, the findings of the study discovered that high level of appropriation in-class hours, complex ways of exam cheating, plagiarism, distorting and fabricating assignment and research findings, and degree mill were dominantly apparent types of academic corruption. Likewise, among the causes of these academic corruptions, the most prevailing ones were high-level of technological reliance, little knowledge about the consequence of academic dishonesty, hopelessness in the return in education, a culture of an easy way out, and family expectations of having a degree were sighted as the push factors from the students' side. Conversely, lack of professional ethics, failure to use technology to support the teaching-learning and research, lack of pedagogical training and research skills, excessive teaching load, lack of proper accountability and transparency mechanisms, and lack of motivation were the reasons why the academic staffs contributed to this ill behavior. In a similar fashion, the government was also responsible due to failure in devising comprehensive national accreditation mechanisms, lack of concern for the education sector and being a horrific role model in academic engagements for the younger generation. As a result, the quality of graduates and education is in jeopardy. Therefore, since education is the mother of all sectors that needs due attention and to curtail this corrupt trend in the higher education sector, the government and the Ministry of Sciences and Higher Education through collaborative effort from actors in the sector, should envisage a way to create strong colloquium that set standards for academic professional conduct, create technology adaptive environment, be committed to design and execute new ways of responsibility and accountability platform, mainstream ethical standards in the curriculum, and place monitoring and evaluation scheme for creating change adaptive educational context and create a continuous research culture so as to alleviate the shocking academic corruption perceived in the higher education institutions.

**Keywords:** academic corruption, professional ethics, higher education institutions

**Rationale**

Corruption is a global phenomenon every nation faces with different magnitude in the political, economic, social and technological environment of the globe. Beyond this, it is at its best a shorthand reference for a large range of dishonest and criminal activities (World Bank, 2017). In its broadest usages, it can refer to both the act or process of corrupting and the state of being corrupt. It can refer to such processes in public office, private business, or personal life. Like any other sectors, the education sector in general and the higher education sector in particular suffers from this behavior.

As the OECD reports in 2018, higher education institutions are responsible for intellectual capital formation and the value of academic integrity that consists of honesty, trust, respect, fairness, and responsibility which is fundamental to the reputation of academic institutions. But now a days, universities suffer lack of integrity that includes the practice of plagiarism, cheating, unauthorized use of others' work, paying for assignments claiming as one's own, the falsification of data, downloading assignments from the internet, the misrepresentation of records, and fraudulent publication. It also includes payment for grades with gifts, money, or sexual favors. These corrupt behaviors are generally categorized under four broad categories as political, administrative and bureaucratic, academic, and extortion (Bloom, D. et al, 2006 P. 1).

### **Problem Statement**

In a modern world where education becomes the mother of all sectors in providing competent human capital, the role of education is key in setting standards for academic integrity. This can be translated through setting standards in honesty, trust, respect, fairness, and responsibility which are fundamental to the reputation of academic institutions (IEP-UNESCO, 2018). Besides, it is the sector's responsibility to produce efficient and responsible graduates who can change and improve the living standard of the society and set a moral standard, mutual respect and social trust for sustainable development.

According to Gow, S. (2014, p. 70-83), competition for resources and fame place pressures on higher education institutions. As institutions that fail to fulfill the moral obligations enter the university systems, they in turn intimidate the status of research and credentials. As a result of this corrupt behavior, the individual and socio- economic rate of return of higher education investments is reduced. Consequently, the reputation for academic dishonesty brings low level of trust towards graduates, institutions and the sector at large.

Disturbingly, in a recent survey which was conducted by the University of Makerere in 2006, among 7,000 young students aged 18-35 it was found out that 60% admired people who use get-rich-quick scheme, more than 50% believed that it does not matter how one makes money, while 53% said they would do anything to get money. 37% would take or give a bribe and 35% believed there is nothing wrong with corruption.

In Ethiopia, researches have shown the high rate of academic dishonesty particularly on cheating during an examination (Tefera & Kinde, 2009). Therefore, this study tried to explore the experience of faculty members, active students and recent graduates about the academic corruption at its broader sense through qualitative inquiry in line with the current massification of higher education institutions.

### **Objectives of the Study**

Generally, the study was intended to explore the academic corruption in Ethiopian higher education institutions from the experience of the faculty members, active students, and recent graduates' point of view.

Specifically, it was intended to identify the major types of academic corruptions, causes of academic fraud, and to suggest possible solutions to curb the academic dishonesty in Ethiopian higher education institutions.

### **Methods**

A qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach was used in this study so as to understand the experience of students and academic leaders about academic corruption in Ethiopian higher education institutions (Moustakas, 1994, p.43). This approach views the methodology as a series of logical steps, accounts for multiple perspectives from participants, and utilizes rigorous data collection and analysis. In this study, in depth interview, focus group discussion and document analysis were used as a means of data collection, through lengthy and rigorous analytic process, and to validate and make the findings reliable (Creswell, 2013, p. 46).

### **Sampling and Participants**

A total of ten respondents were purposely selected from regular division consisting of three department heads, four active students, and three graduates of 2010 E.C. After a brief discussion about the purpose of the study, participants were contacted through face to face communication followed by signing the consent form. Then, pseudonym was given for each participant but in line with the agreement made with the institution earlier. I did not mention the research setting in this document so as to protect its reputation.

### **Data Collection**

After completing the rapport, the data collection was followed. Since I am currently working in one of the higher education institutions, I chose to conduct this study in other higher education institutions as a PhD student so as to minimize biases before the data collection in order to assure data accuracy. Then, based on the semi structured interview protocol, which was developed and reviewed by two independent researcher instructors, the data collection started and audio taped for accuracy. At that juncture, the interviews with academic leaders were conducted in their private office while data from the students were collected through focus group discussion. Finally, the data collection was completed within a period of 6 weeks. There is no standard for a minimum number of participants in qualitative research because its purpose is not to generalize as far as extensive detail has been collected to saturation (Creswell, 2013, p., 63). In this study, additional respondents were no longer recruited once saturation had been reached, in which no new information was provided to aid in the understanding of the phenomenon (Francis, et al., 2010)

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis went hand in hand with the data collection process and it was used after each individual transcript was read twice to immerse the researcher in the data to highlight the key concepts (Moustakas, 1994, p.52). After an initial engagement, themes were identified through horizontalization of ideas with equal values, reduction and elimination of statements that were not in the scope of the study was made, and clustering of similar ideas was done to

identify a thematic label. This step was repeated several times to further group and reduce categories until all constituents were clustered and reduced into 5 core themes of the experience. Finally, identification of these themes was performed by re-reading the complete transcripts to verify that the theme and accompanying invariant constituents were explicitly expressed and compatible with the participants' words.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Commonly identified reliability techniques used in this study include the recording of detailed interview, an audio recorder for accuracy, using document analysis, and inter-coder agreement from independent coder (Silverman, 2005, P. 9).

Lastly, two research instructors have analyzed the data independently and then met with the researcher to discuss codes. There were no significant discrepancies, and any small differences were discussed and resolved to create one set of themes. Commonly identified validation techniques used in this study include data source triangulation to corroborate evidence, bracketing to clarify bias, and member checking (Erlandson, et al. 1993, p. 133).

Final themes, as well as a sample of the invariant constituents of those themes, were e-mailed to all the academic leaders to verify their response. Those who responded reported that the provided account accurately reflected their perspectives and experiences and added some proverbs for clarity.

### **Discussion and Results**

#### **Theme 1: Academic Corruption**

Academic corruption can be translated through plagiarism, essay and dissertation mills, falsification of research data and results, fake journals and peer review, using unauthorized material in exams, impersonation, hacking test banks, bribe-influenced alteration of marks on exam scripts or in the exam results database, degree mills/certificate forgery( Kuranchie, A., 2014).

While the question was forwarded to all respondents to gauge their knowledge about the concept of academic corruption, most of the respondents had some idea about it but as an extreme case a student respondent said that, 'It must be a joke if we think that there is an academic corruption. In the first place, an education sector is a place of broke people and I don't think there is a way for corruption.' (Abdu, 1st-year student).

After further clarification about the concept in its theoretical frame, the students got cautious about the accountability attached to it if all these issues are considered as corruption. And this same student asked me that, 'if it is so, who is going to be clean since every one of us are doing it in one or another form?'

Therefore, from this it can be concluded that there is low level of awareness towards academic corruption since commonly the term is aligned with money related issues.

## **Theme 2: Plagiarism and Essay Mills**

Plagiarism occurs when a person presents someone else's ideas, phrases, sentences or data as one's own work. Another person's work should always be properly and accurately referenced. Self-plagiarism involves submitting work that one has previously submitted (Dawson, P., 2015).

All the respondents were asked about the situations that are perceived in our higher education institutions related to plagiarism.

All of the respondents agreed that this has become a common practice in our education system. And as a result, everyone prefers to copy and paste than doing original work. In addition, effort was made to pinpoint, for discussion, some of the issues that might potentially contribute to this kind of behavior in our educational work. Some of the views of the students and the university leaders are presented below:

*In the first place, we didn't have any rigorous research background to conduct a research even during our stay in the university. We only took a research course for a semester and our grade is evaluated based on the exam result than testing us in practical situations. In addition to this, it is a fashion of the day to copy from the internet and submit it as ours. This is because no one cares about what we are up to and we know that if it is a written assignment, a research work, or any other, the instructors and we the students think that it is a bonus (Sara, 3rd year).*

Similarly, another respondent who was one of a graduating class of 2010 E.C. witnessed that,

*'Plagiarism seems legal in our country. In my batch, most of my classmates were doing their senior research from the internet, particularly on research works from East Africa. Plus, during a course assignment, an instructor was giving 18 out of 20 for an assignment presented to him for the past 3 years without even reading it. In another incident, 'I had an advisor who was a department head, who had a maximum teaching load and 25 advisees. ...what happened was, he told me that my review of literature was bombarded and needs some detail readings. I tried to test him by giving him what he had given me as it is, without even changing a full stop.....and he told me I did well and told me to proceed with my data collection. Surprisingly, is it not in front of the universities that paid research assistances are advertised? Last year, my class mate paid 7,000.00 (Seven thousand birr) for her senior essay and during the defense session the examiners asked her where the organization was located since it was clear that the company was closed and she failed. The only thing that they did to her was to change the company and to come up within 15 days, and that was it.(Laughter). So, why on earth should others suffer? (Medhanit, Alumni).*

*'Oh! Nowadays plagiarism seems a common course for our students across our universities. I think, there is nothing that we can do about it. As you know, the type of students that are coming to higher education is baseless and highly corrupt in*

*their lower grades; our instructors are so busy running here and there to at least survive; and the little concern given to the sector brings this problem. In addition, there is no commitment by the side of the academician to at least identify the problem and to help students. We know that the consequence for students' theft in any regard will be re-work and other disciplinary measures, but it will be waste of time for both parties since everyone is the same as በባዳ ቢያኮርቶ፡ በጨለማ ቢያፈጡ፡ ምን ሊያመጡ እንደሚባለዉ' ( Simon, Department Head).*

*'These days, anyone of us is forced to work in a very tight schedule so as to earn more and to fulfill at least our family responsibilities. I know it is a corrupt behavior but most of us are working for at least five universities and you can imagine how we are tired even for class hours. It is also hard to properly advise and correct students' assignment and research work. Let me tell you one real story....a friend of mine works 85 hours per week in 7 universities, and can you imagine how he can allocate his time?..... I know you can't imagine...as Limeneh (an Ethiopian comedian) once said .....ተቢድረን ሞተናል..... I interrupted and asked him, how can he manage this (Laughter). You know, there are emerging vocabularies in our current higher education context like.... the 'Hit-and-run', the 'In-and-out' and the like. I asked him to further elaborate these terms and he said, the 'Hit and run' comes to the class and talks about concepts indicated in the title then declares the chapter is over..... (feeling disgusted), and in the 'In- and- out' case, the instructor comes to class on time since most of the universities have class controllers and goes out within a few minutes after his attendance is done. The funniest part, in this case, is students are so happy since they also leave early. If an instructor who is orthodoxy in keeping the rules of the 'normal' teaching-learning, students may label him/her as 'oldies' and condemn them equally with the one who doesn't want to give good grades, no matter what. So, can we think of effective teaching-learning, research and community engagement in this condition?' (Firew, department head)*

From this, it can be understood that plagiarism and essay mill have become part of the normal academic exercise. And missing classes has become the dominant behavior in the universities.

### **Theme 3: Falsification of Research Processes and Results**

Falsification of research data poses enormous challenges for humanity as a whole. Among the notorious examples in this regard is, "Climate-gate", the scandal which was done by the Climate Research Unit at the University of East Anglia and was found to have tampered with data on global warming. The incident has created turmoil to the issue of climate change and other scientific theory deniers, casting a shadow over the credibility and integrity of academia as a whole (Harper M. (2006) p. 674-679).

Based on the above notion, I asked respondents their experience about falsification of the research findings and the process. All of them asked me, 'if the instructors fail to read and comment about the research, who is afraid not to distort it in any convenient way?'

*'When I started doing my senior essay, I tried to do it by myself, but my friends were mocking at me since they were copying and pasting papers from our universities and no one says anything. Before that, during the title submission for our senior essay, everyone was fighting to hoard at least five papers in and outside of our campus, and my friends submitted their research title to the department based on this backup. But after a while, I joined my friends and copied at least the literature review from a research paper done at Adama University. During the defense session, the two examiners were trying to read my paper in the exam hall, and they only asked me two questions and that was it. So, who is concerned about either the process or the trustworthiness of the findings?' (Solomon, a graduating class student).*

#### **Theme 4: Examination Fraud**

Examination fraud takes various forms, from leaking exams in advance to cheating during examination sessions by using unauthorized material, impersonation, where examination candidates pay other people to sit in exams on their behalf, as well as alteration of marks either directly on the answer sheet or in the examination records management system (Brimble, M. & Stevenson, 2005 p. 19-44).

Although cheating in an exam has been a problem for a long time, technological advancements in the forms of mobile phones and tablets have broadened the means and methods for cheating. Students can request and receive answers to questions by text, wireless microphone and earphones, iPods and MP3 players (Tefera & Kinde, 2010, p. 79-99).

Like most of the responses above, this is the most customary type of corruption found at every level and type of the education sector, as witnessed below.

*'During my 27 years of teaching and leadership experience, the techniques of examination fraud and cheating have become more complex than the actual teaching practice in our country. Last semester, I found identical exam papers on Communicative English course. How dare a student even copy everything in an essay type of exam in the presence of the invigilator? And the most shocking thing was that the culprit so confidently explained her case to the discipline committee telling she copied the exam because she got the consent for copying. Though both of them were getting zero in their mid-term exam, the students did not feel anything about the incident' (Debasu, Department head).*

Contrary to the above response, all of the students think that cheating in exam is not as such a big deal now. This is because no one gains or loses from being educated.

*'I am so amazed at how everyone is trying to make it a big deal. First of all, most of us are here at least to have a degree to make our families proud. And we are not sure if this degree will enable us to have a job or not since most of our brothers and sisters who have sacrificed their time, energy and pleasure for education are still wandering around to find a job. For instance, if you take my case, I have a brother who got 3.8 and graduated in Textile*

*Engineering, but is currently working as an accountant for my cousin's spare part shop. So why should I suffer? I don't even know what will happen next? And I hope my friends think the same way.*

I asked him to share his experience how students cheat in the exam and he told me the following:

*'Most of the time, if the invigilator is not as such serious, we might use our telephone data connection to browse or we might photo shoot the exam questions and send to someone through our group account like WhatsApp, telegram, or IMO so as to send the answer to the class. Or we might write the answers for multiple choice and true/false questions on the attendance sheet so as to make it available to the whole class. We also copy short notes and writings on the walls and board.s' (Fitsum, 2<sup>nd</sup> year student).*

Therefore, from the above responses the issue of exam fraud in the form of exam cheating is prevalent in higher education. This results from the fact students losing hope in the return of investment in education in their future.

#### **Theme 5: Degree/ Diploma Mills**

Some degree mills are mere printing shops that sell counterfeit degrees and transcripts from legitimate schools, while others are shadowy institutions that promise applicant's degrees in a very short period of time with little or no academic engagements (Abagi, 2006, p. 91). Accordingly, questions regarding such acts were forwarded to all respondents and the most characteristic responses are presented hereunder:

*'I think it is not as such hard to have a forged academic credential from any higher learning institutions. For instance, if we take the case which was broadcasted on the media, many civil servants were found with false credentials in different regions. And I do hope that unless serious attention is given at a national level, including the universities, we might be the leading in acquiring false degrees since culturally we praise credentials than merit. You know it is like..... አሳ ሲበላሽ ከአናቱ ነጩ እንዲሉ the value acquiring false academic credentials is taken as a legal document for even the higher government officials who are entrusted with a huge task of formulating/ setting policies. So, you can imagine how the ordinary citizen enjoy the easy cooked degrees if there is no accountability?' (Samuel, Department head).*

Similarly, Maru, who is currently working as a department head had to say the following:

*'As a university, we try all our best to check students' academic credentials during admission. However, it is done manually, and the level of accuracy is not as such perfect. In addition, if we find out that a credential is suspected of fraud, we need to pay 50 Birr per a credential for authentication by the National Educational Assessment and Examination Agency. Since it is costly, most of the time we are forced to do the verification manually. However, during degree issuance, forgery becomes prevalent most of the time if students are paying for the internal staff of the university.*



*But, it will be detected if this forged credential is used for an academic purpose since the consent of the official is asked by the university and if they don't have any record it will be traced. Moreover, there are organizations that send letters to check if a particular student has attended that university. But, if the one with a forged credential is not suspected by the employer or restrains from further education, it will remain there. But we automatically expel students if we find forgery and file it as a law case. Among other things, since we don't have an autonomous quality and accreditation agency, there are universities that are officially engaged in degree selling'.*

Overall, from the respondents' responses, the problem of forgery, degree mill, lack of strong controlling mechanisms, and absence of central graduates' repository were identified as the sources of degree mills.

From the overall discussion, the respondents' experience in relation to academic corruption and its components, a number of major contributing factors can be sighted. On the side of the students, the feeling of losing hope on the education sector, lack of role models, and culture of easy way out are some of them. Lack of academic integrity, low commitment for their job, and lack of pedagogic and methodological training can be sighted as major factors on the instructors' part. Likewise, low attention given to the education sector, lack of strong quality assurance agency, and mob culture were some of the elements for academic corruption on the government side.

### **Implications**

An academic community that ignores corrupt behaviors in an academic discipline is violating a core duty of the academic sector including duties owed to their universities, to their students (Granitz and Lewis, 2007), to students' future employers (Brubaker, 2003), and to the community at large (Caldwell, 2007, p.9-20).

In addition, as indicated in the findings of this study, the level of academic corruption in the higher education institutions is deep rooted and potentially affects the quality of input, process, output and outcome of the education, particularly during the aggressive massification of higher education program in Ethiopia. Therefore, it will be wise to have a policy intervention that gives answers to the following questions:

- Do we really need formal education and whose education?
- Why do we need to invest in massification of higher education and programs?
- Do we really have autonomous mechanisms that ensure quality of education in our own context?

### **The Way Forward**

As the findings of this study depicted, currently the trend in academic integrity and professional code of conduct in the education sector has become a serious agenda that needs deep transformation. Due to high level of political interference in the academic institutions that erodes the values of thinking, Ethiopia reaps the most corrupt citizen that appreciate easy way out than working hard than ever.

Therefore, the Government, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education together with Universities must work towards providing quality education and maintaining high level of professional code of conduct in the higher education sector. I believe the following recommendations will help to narrow the existing catastrophe in the higher education sector and its replicating effect on other sectors.

- Devise education policy that gives credit for the input, process, output, and outcome of the education in general and higher education in particular.
- Revise the strategies that help to refocus investment in the academic community and technology-based educational inputs than investment on massification of higher education programs.
- Encourage and support the formation of strong colloquium that set standards for academic professional, conduct and mainstream ethical standards in the curriculum.
- Ensure comprehensive central archives to make graduates' information accessible.
- Ensure strong national autonomous quality, relevance, monitoring and evaluation scheme.

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