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54. AFRICA: WHAT CAN BE DONE TO TACKLE CORRUPTION?

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In its 2013 *Global Corruption Report: Education*, Transparency International indicates that corruption in higher education is widespread in Africa. Because higher education has such an important role to play in the social and economic development of Africa, it is imperative that this issue be addressed and appropriate solutions found.

GOVERNANCE

Until a couple of decades ago a significant number of Anglophone African universities had the country's president as the titular head (or chancellor) of the institution. With the growing number of public universities in each country, this has now changed, but there are still countries in Africa, for example Zimbabwe, where this situation prevails. Having the head of a country within the governance structure of a university is not a healthy situation as it can lead to political interference.

The chancellor in many African public universities is still appointed by the state president (or the minister) and although s/he plays essentially a ceremonial role, the chancellor has the important responsibility of appointing, or approving the appointment of, key governance positions such as the chair of council or the vice-chancellor. In many African countries, the appointment of the executive head (vice-chancellor or rector) of a public university is now undertaken by the institution's governing council, even if the final approval has to be given by the minister in many cases. But there are exceptions. In some universities in Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, the executive head is still appointed by the head of state.

In public universities, good governance is important for ensuring autonomy and academic freedom. This is best achieved if a university operates at an arm's length from government in order to avoid political interference. The executive head of an African university has an important role to play in ensuring good governance and management within the institution. However, suspected cases of fraud and corruption involving the executive head are not uncommon and have been reported in, for example, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe. In 2011 and 2012,

five public universities in South Africa were placed 'under administration' by the minister of higher education following reports of suspected cases of serious financial or other maladministration. There are two lessons to be learnt from the above. First, legislation of public universities in Africa must ensure that government cannot directly interfere in the running of the universities. Second, public universities and their executive heads must be accountable.

STUDENT ADMISSIONS

Public universities in Africa are unable to cope with the ever-increasing demand from students graduating from the secondary school sector. This situation has led to corruption involving students, government, and university officials, and even intermediary private admissions agents. It has been reported that paying a bribe in order to gain admission to a degree programme of choice is on the increase in most universities in Africa. In 2012, an article in a Nigerian newspaper reported that university officials often consider recommendation letters from politicians, that university admission is rarely on merit and that there are cases where a candidate who has not even applied gets admitted. The number of students admitted to African universities will inevitably increase dramatically over the next decades and this will pose even greater challenges in admissions. One solution would be resort to the use of information and communications technology, or ICT, in the selection process. Since the 1990s, the University of Mauritius has put in place a transparent computerised selection system for all its programmes. The relevant secondary school qualifications of a candidate applying for a programme are converted into marks, the aggregate of which is used to list all the candidates for that particular programme, and the best candidates are offered a seat.

DISHONESTY AMONG STUDENTS

Public universities in Africa have enrolled students far in excess of their carrying capacity. The overcrowded campuses and severe competition among students create an environment conducive to academic dishonesty. In order to assess the seriousness of cheating and plagiarism among students in African universities, a few surveys have been undertaken recently.

A 2012 anonymous survey among 475 students from three East African universities showed that 35% of them had quoted material from another source without acknowledgement, 31% had allowed their coursework to be copied by another student, and 33% had fabricated a reference. Also, 25% admitted to collusion during an examination to communicate answers, and 18% to deliberately miss-shelving or cutting the relevant pages of a publication to disadvantage other students. Perhaps the most alarming finding was that 5% of the students confessed to taking an examination for someone else or someone else took their examination. There are hardly any reports on what strategies African universities are adopting to

combat academic dishonesty among students. However, universities and colleges in the US also face similar challenges and African universities could learn from their experiences. In 2009, an extensive survey of public and private universities and colleges in the US revealed that the most effective practices in promoting academic integrity among students are:

• Providing training to academic staff on academic integrity issues;
• Implementing effective classroom management;
• Providing clear definitions and examples of cheating; and
• Indicating cheating on official transcripts of students found guilty.

DISHONESTY AMONG ACADEMIC STAFF

Academic staff in African public universities operate under severe conditions: very heavy teaching load, large numbers of students in classes, hardly any time for research, and poor salaries and working conditions. There have been several reports on academic staff involved in unethical practices in Africa. In Nigeria, which has the largest higher education system in Africa, areas where corruption occurs most frequently among academic staff are in promotions, journal and book publications, extortion of money for handouts and marks, and sexual harassment. A recent survey from two universities in Ghana revealed that nepotism (58%) and favouritism (55%) are perceived by the students to be the most common abuses by academic staff, followed by examination malpractice (50%), forcing students to buy handouts (36%), sexual harassment (31%), and abuse of office (30%).

There is hardly any documentation on strategies adopted by African universities to curb malpractices among academic staff, apart from taking punitive measures. Some universities have incorporated anti-graft rules within the code of conduct for their staff. Most Kenyan public universities have an anti-corruption policy document. Although it is meant for the whole university, it really targets the staff of the university and has a special section on teaching and conduct of examinations. It would be interesting to carry out a survey to determine the effectiveness of such a document in preventing or curbing corruption.

FAKE DEGREES AND DEGREE MILLS

The growing demand for higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa has provided fertile ground for the sale of fake degree certificates and the operation of institutions that provide degrees with hardly any period of study, commonly known as degree mills. There are reported cases of even politicians, religious leaders and other senior officials in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda who have purchased fake degrees. Most of the degree mills are located in North America and Europe, while others are scattered globally in hidden locations. So far, attempts at stopping the operation of fake degree manufacturers and degree mills have had limited

success. UNESCO has created a portal that lists all the recognised higher education institutions in different regions of the world. While this is helpful, a more aggressive approach would have been to create a 'blacklist' of known and identified degree mills. No organisation has so far established and made public such a list, no doubt fearing legal and political repercussions.

This issue needs to be dealt with at two levels. At national level, any person suspected of having purchased a fake degree of an existing, recognised institution should be legally prosecuted as this is clearly a fraudulent practice. With regard to degree mills, this needs to be dealt with at international level, with the collaboration of organisations such as UNESCO, the International Association of Universities, the US-based Council for Higher Education Accreditation and the Association of African Universities.

REGIONAL-INTERNATIONAL APPROACH

There is sufficient evidence to show that the existence of unethical practices is fairly widespread in African universities. Of course, the nature and degree of these practices vary from country to country, and even from one institution to another within a country. Many of the malpractices are also common to universities in other parts of the world, where they may have devised appropriate strategies to curb them. These could be shared with African universities. One area that comes to mind is plagiarism. There are tools available for its detection but they do not appear to be widely used in African higher education institutions, except perhaps in Nigeria and South Africa. The situation of academic integrity in Sub-Saharan Africa, already serious, will no doubt worsen with increasing enrolment in higher education, greater output of research and PhD students, and with the rapid improvement in technology making a far greater number of academic publications accessible online. The matter warrants both a regional and an international approach.