University World News
THE GLOBAL WINDOW ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Developing Countries Showing Way to Fight Fraud

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13 January 2018 University World News Global Edition Issue 488

Nigeria is among a number of developing countries going further than many developed countries in specifically addressing academic corruption in law and many African universities are seeking to copy its commitment to not only punish but name and shame offenders.

When Peter Okebukola was appointed executive secretary of the National Universities Commission, or NUC, in Nigeria in 2001, one of the first things he decided to do was move against satellite campuses that were selling certificates, a major source of academic fraud.

He persuaded the then president of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo, to provide him with police back-up and on 3 August he issued an executive order to close the campuses. The police department sent officers to every satellite campus – there were 60 or so at the time – to enforce the order and in one day they were all shut down.

"In Africa you have to be firm and fair or it doesn't work," he says. "The achievement spurred me to walk further along this path."

More than a decade later, in 2012, a national survey of academic corruption in Nigeria showed the breadth of the ongoing challenge.

In a higher education system serving 160 universities and 1.8 million students, forms of corruption reported included cheating during exams; marks given for favours, especially financial and sexual; hacking of institutional IT systems to alter students' academic records; plagiarism of assignments, term papers and theses; absenteeism of students and lecturers from classes; failure to cover the syllabus before the end of the semester and the conduct of the examination; outsourcing of theses, assignments and projects; publishing in fake journals; and sabotage involving preventing others from completing their work, for example by cutting pages out of library books or wilfully disrupting the experiments of others.

Okebukola, who is now president of the Global University Network for Innovation, or GUNi-Africa, with 44 member countries, and a distinguished professor of science and computer education at Lagos State University, Nigeria, told *University World News*: "These forms [of corruption] are common in many African countries – they were all reported in country experiences documented in the communique of GUNi-Africa's 2017 regional conference last September."

The GUNi-Africa president has been fighting academic corruption for many years, first in Nigeria, and now both across Africa and globally in collaboration with CIQG – the International Quality Group of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation in the United States – and UNESCO.

He doesn't think there is any difference between developing and developed countries in terms of the form of academic corruption.

"Every category can be found in both. Whether in India, the US or the UK you will find all these forms of corruption. But the scale is on a different level in developing countries."

There are a few reasons for the latter, he says: the greater emphasis placed on paper qualifications, rather than the ability to perform; the very large classes, where it is harder to prevent copying of assignments; and the pressure on admissions from a lack of spaces, and the huge competition for graduate jobs.

Over the past five years, since the shocking findings of the 2012 survey, which Okebukola himself led, there has been a clear drive by government and many universities, encouraged by the NUC, to establish clear policies on academic corruption to address the problems and make students and staff aware of what the penalties for transgressions will be.

A key step was that, following the 2012 national survey, the Nigerian government set up the Anti-Corruption Academy of Nigeria, the first of its kind in Africa, that conducts capacity-building workshops for staff and students on avoiding academic corruption.

In addition, clear policies on academic corruption have been established in all universities stating what is considered to be corruption and what the penalties will be.

These are widely disseminated and, in many universities, students and staff are made to sign an agreement on them.

In all Nigerian universities, giant notice boards conspicuously display key aspects of the policies. All examination scripts have the policy on the front page.

Importantly, sanctions are applied when the policies are transgressed regardless of the status of the offender. Wide publicity including in national dailies is given to guilty parties.

Making staff and students aware of the sanctions is very important. "If you walked into any Nigerian university today you would see a big signboard warning that cheating in the exam will lead to dismissal from the university and you will find the same message on any exam paper," says Okebukola. Staff who are found guilty of corrupt practices are also sacked.

Among the practical steps to crack down on corruption, many universities now use plagiarism checker software. Also in many universities, all assignments, term papers and theses are

accompanied by a signed statement by the student confirming that the materials therein are not plagiarised.

University policy on fake journals and the names of such journals are widely disseminated and universities are encouraged to share them. The Association of Vice-Chancellors of Nigerian Universities collaborates with the NUC to update the blacklist. In addition, postgraduate students and staff are encouraged to patronise high-impact, good quality journals.

So what has been the impact? In December 2017, a national survey showed a 20% reduction in cases of examination malpractice.

Name and shame and punish

Okebukola says if there is a lesson from Nigeria's experience for other countries, it is a very straightforward one: "Name and shame, let the world know that this person has been found guilty of this – and punish, punish, punish," he says.

Nothing works better than publishing the details of transgressions, he argues.

"In Nigeria when you are caught it is not just that you get a letter saying you are being extricated from the university, it is published on the university website, in national dailies, the press carry it. So if don't want to bring name of your family into disrepute or ruin your reputation …[Everyone] knows the repercussions and this makes others scared of walking along the same path."

Okebukola accepts that in any country it is harder to take effective action measures in higher education if the context is a society where corruption is widespread.

He stresses that while the West likes to highlight examples of corruption or malpractice in Africa, in fact they can be found in every country, including the US and the UK.

Even the current president of the United States, Donald Trump, has faced allegations of fraud, over the now defunct for-profit Trump University. He settled three class action fraud suits for US$25 million in November 2016, days after his election victory, with no admission of fault or liability. The suits had listed more than 6,000 people who claimed they were lured into paying up to US$35,000 to learn the secrets of Trump's business success.

But Okebukola accepts that Nigeria has a poor image internationally on corruption, which makes the task harder – Nigeria was ranked 136th out of 175 countries assessed in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index in 2014, and 31st out of 47 countries assessed in Sub-Saharan Africa.

"We must factor in reducing corruption in society at large. Universities have a role in producing graduates that have a low tendency towards corruption. But when the graduate comes out and works in an environment riddled with corruption, it is difficult."

His view is that to be effective you must tackle corruption not just in universities but at all levels in the education system. Even at basic level there are corrupt teachers, and parents who bribe them for exam questions because they want their children to get into elite schools, and when the students go on to university the same practices carry on.

Judith Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation or CHEA, says countries such as Nigeria, Pakistan and the Philippines, that have most recently been developing quality assurance capacity, have all had issues around corruption but have been focusing in their quality assurance development on how to deal with the issues, including tackling fake degrees and shutting down degree mills.

Commitment and purposefulness

"If you look at the US we don't explicitly focus on academic corruption in our legislation and we don't close down many schools," Eaton says. "But I think these developing countries are displaying a certain kind of strength, commitment and purposefulness that is not there in developed countries."

In Nigeria the NUC is assisting with workshops to share knowledge and promote awareness. Workshops were also used in Accra, Ghana, for the meeting of GUNi members from 24 countries.

CHEA now cites Nigeria as one of a number of countries developing quality assurance capacity that is instituting explicit laws against certain types of corruption, monitoring institutions and shutting them down if there is evidence of corruption.

Across Africa, GUNi-Africa is building capacity, talking to officials, pressing for public awareness and ensuring that people who are caught are sanctioned and that the sanctions are publicised.

The organisation is using the guidelines on academic corruption developed by CIQG – whose advisory council Okebukola chairs – and UNESCO. "We are starting a major movement in Africa," Okebukola says, "with the aim of reducing incidents of corruption by 5% a year in the higher education systems of the Africa region.

"We are taking this very seriously because of the deleterious effect it has on national development."