

ETHICS, CORRUPTION, & AUTHORITY

Misconduct Among Postgraduate Students in African Universities

Harris Andoh

Since the early 2000s, African universities have expanded postgraduate education as part of their mission to drive knowledge production, human capital, and national development. Growth through part-time, weekend, and MBA programs has widened access but also fostered widespread misconduct. Plagiarism, contract cheating, falsified research, and collusion are increasingly reported, often in the context of weak supervision and lax enforcement. Drawing on evidence from Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Zambia, and Nigeria, this article shows how misconduct erodes graduate quality and the credibility of African degrees. It calls for ethical reforms, stronger accountability, and robust quality assurance to safeguard the integrity of postgraduate education.

Recent findings across Africa show a concerning rise in unethical behavior among postgraduate students, particularly in weekend, part-time, and MBA programs. These questionable practices include plagiarism, ghostwriting (a form of contract cheating, in which teaching assistants do students' assignments), research fabrication (including the practice of individuals and companies writing theses and dissertations for a fee), examination fraud, and sex-for-grades scandals.

The Landscape of Professional Misconduct

These practices directly contradict the core purposes of postgraduate education: original research, advanced and continuous learning, and professional preparation. Plagiarism, for example, undermines intellectual honesty by passing off others' work as one's own, while contract cheating erodes the educational value of assessment. When a student purchases a dissertation or thesis, they are not only violating academic standards but also falsely signaling expertise and competence to future employers and academic institutions.

And yet these practices appear to be rampant. For example, in Kenya, the Commission for University Education revealed that, in 2023, nearly 35 percent of submitted postgraduate theses contained unoriginal or improperly cited material, with some cases showing up to 60 percent plagiarism detected via Turnitin reports. In 2022, the University of Ghana sanctioned over 100 students for various forms of academic misconduct, with 20 cases involving graduate students engaged in recycling past theses without attribution. At the University of South Africa, over 1,400 disciplinary cases were investigated in a single year (2023), with postgraduate students accounting for more than half of these cases. South Africa's Council on Higher Education

has also noted a pattern of increased plagiarism and research manipulation in coursework-based master degree programs. MBA programs, often marketed as fast-tracked, career-enhancing qualifications, appear to be particularly susceptible. In Nigeria, the National Universities Commission closed 58 illegal postgraduate and MBA centers in 2022, citing widespread forgery, poor supervision, and the use of unqualified staff.

Institutional Gaps

Although most African universities have formal academic integrity policies in place, their implementation is inconsistent. The problem, therefore, lies less in the absence of rules and more in a lack of enforcement and awareness.

For example, while institutions like the University of Ghana and Makerere University have detailed anti-plagiarism guidelines and access to tools like Turnitin, a 2021 survey among postgraduate students revealed that only 41 percent had received formal training on citation ethics. Supervisors are often overstretched, handling upward of 20 to 30 theses at a time, reducing their capacity to detect or prevent misconduct.

Moreover, many part-time and weekend programs are managed as semi-autonomous entities within universities, where oversight is looser and quality control mechanisms are weak. In Zambia, a 2022 audit by the Higher Education Authority found that 28 percent of MBA and part-time programs in public universities lacked active supervisory committees or internal review boards. In Kenya, internal governance mechanisms such as university councils, disciplinary committees, and audit offices exist, yet are often under-resourced. Furthermore, cultural factors discourage whistleblowing. A 2020 study found that 72 percent of students who had witnessed misconduct did not

report it, citing fear of retaliation or lack of faith in institutional follow-through.

On the other hand, several structural and contextual factors contribute to the likelihood of misconduct, including time constraints (many part-time students are working professionals with limited time for genuine academic engagement), credentialism (the rise of degree inflation means that a master degree is increasingly seen as a basic requirement rather than a mark of expertise), commercialization (universities, seeking revenue, have expanded postgraduate offerings rapidly without proportional investment in quality assurance), and social pressures (postgraduate degrees confer social capital, which fuels demand, regardless of merit). This environment makes misconduct not just an individual choice but a systemic risk, with institutions sometimes turning a blind eye to ensure enrollment numbers and financial targets are met.

Consequences and Implications

Unchecked academic misconduct has far-reaching consequences. First, it produces graduates who lack essential competencies. Employers report growing skepticism about the quality of African postgraduate degree holders. In a 2023 pan-African survey by the Association of African Universities, 46 percent of employers said they had to retrain recent master degree graduates in basic research or communication skills.

Second, the credibility of African universities on the global stage is at risk. As more institutions seek international partnerships, questionable degrees can lead to rejection of credentials, loss of exchange opportunities, and diminished competitiveness in global academic rankings.

Third, the erosion of trust damages public confidence in higher education. When students see peers rewarded despite cheating, it undermines morale and promotes a culture of cynicism.

Conclusion

It is clear that universities have noticed these issues, but are restricted in their ability to act, given the dual pressures to meet national massification agendas and simultaneously create revenue to meet their financial obligations.

However, these issues cannot go unaddressed. The proliferation of misconduct among postgraduate students in Africa, particularly in part-time, weekend, and MBA programs, poses a fundamental threat to the quality, credibility, and future relevance of higher education qualifications on the continent. While policies exist, their inconsistent application and the structural incentives of expansion over quality have created a breeding ground for unethical practices.

To restore confidence in African postgraduate education, institutions must go beyond punitive measures. This includes investing in supervisor training, embedding ethics in curricula, developing centralized thesis databases, and improving student orientation regarding academic integrity. National accreditation bodies should also increase monitoring and make audit findings public.

The future of African higher education depends not only on increasing access but also on ensuring that its degrees remain meaningful. Without bold action, the very mission of postgraduate education—to develop knowledge leaders and critical thinkers—will be undermined by short-term gains and long-term reputational damage.

Harris Andoh is a research fellow at CSIR-Science and Technology Policy Research Institute (STEPRI) in Ghana. E-mail: hfandoh@csir-stepri.org.