



ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN THE MANAGEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines contemporary practices while reflecting on the broader ethical implications for higher education institutions. It emphasizes the need for proactive policies and holistic approaches to mitigate ethical violations and promote an environment rooted in transparency, accountability, and integrity. Addressing these challenges is paramount for sustaining the credibility of academic institutions and fostering ethical development among future generations. Higher education plays a vital role in the development of individuals and society, university and other tertiary institution are expected to promote knowledge, research, innovation, and moral value. because of this important role, ethical behaviour is essential in ensuring that the academic environment remains credible fair, and productive.

Introduction

Higher education institutions are expected to uphold high standards of integrity, accountability, transparency, and professionalism. Universities serve as centers for knowledge creation, research development, and the training of future leaders in society. As such, maintaining ethical standards in these institutions is extremely important for the credibility and effectiveness of the educational system. However, many universities across the world face numerous ethical challenges that undermine the integrity of academic activities and the trust placed in them by society.

These ethical challenges affect different aspects of higher education including teaching, research, administration, student conduct, and institutional governance. According to Iloka, (2021) and Eze and Chukwuma (2023) and Anushiem (2026), when ethical standards are compromised, the reputation of universities may decline and the quality of graduates produced may be negatively affected. Understanding these challenges is therefore essential for developing effective strategies to promote ethical conduct within higher education institutions (Altbach & Salmi, 2021). The ethical challenges are discussed below.

Academic Dishonesty Among Students

Academic dishonesty remains one of the most widespread ethical problems in higher education institutions. Academic dishonesty refers to any form of cheating, plagiarism, falsification of academic work, or dishonest behaviour that gives students unfair academic advantage. Plagiarism is one of the most common forms of academic dishonesty. It involves presenting someone else's ideas, writings, or research findings as one's own without proper acknowledgment of the original author. With the widespread availability of information on the internet, Akpunonu, (2019), Okechukwu (2025) and Ilodigwe (2026) noted that many students easily copy materials from online sources and submit them as their own academic work.



According to Bretag (2020), the growth of digital technologies has increased opportunities for plagiarism in universities because students can easily access and copy information from electronic sources. Many students lack adequate knowledge of citation styles and academic writing practices, which contributes to unintentional plagiarism.

As stated by Ucheagwu-Okoye (2019), Eze (2023) and Anushiem and Anushiem (2025), examination malpractice is another serious form of academic dishonesty in higher education. This may involve bringing unauthorized materials into examination halls, exchanging answers with other students, using electronic devices to access information during examinations, or receiving assistance from external individuals. Academic dishonesty undermines the credibility of academic qualifications and reduces the quality of graduates produced by universities. When students graduate through dishonest means, they may lack the necessary skills and knowledge required to perform effectively in their professional careers.

Corruption and Bribery in Academic Institutions

Corruption is another major ethical challenge affecting higher education institutions, particularly in developing countries. Corruption refers to the misuse of power or authority for personal gain. In universities, corruption can manifest in several ways including bribery, favouritism, nepotism, and manipulation of academic processes. Some students, according to Eze and Iloka (2022), Anushiem (2024) and Chukwuma (2025), may offer money, gifts, or other incentives to lecturers in exchange for higher grades or academic favours. In some cases, lecturers may demand financial payments or other benefits before assisting students academically. Such unethical practices undermine fairness and meritocracy in the academic system.

According to Okebukola (2020), corruption in higher education institutions weakens public confidence in the credibility of university degrees and promotes inequality among students. When academic success is influenced by bribery rather than academic performance, it discourages hardworking students and promotes injustice. Eze and Iloka (2022), Anushiem (2024) and Chukwuma (2025) noted that corruption may also occur in administrative processes such as admission procedures, staff recruitment, scholarship allocation, and procurement of institutional resources. When these processes are manipulated for personal benefit, it negatively affects the integrity and efficiency of academic institutions.

Sexual Harassment and Exploitation

Sexual harassment is another serious ethical issue affecting many higher education institutions worldwide. Sexual harassment refers to unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, or any form of verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that interferes with an individual's academic or professional environment.

According to Iloka, (2021) and Eze and Chukwuma (2023) and Anushiem (2026), in universities, sexual harassment may occur between lecturers and students, between students themselves, or among staff members. In some cases, individuals in positions of authority may exploit their



power by demanding sexual favors from students in exchange for academic benefits such as grades, supervision opportunities, or academic recommendations.

According to UNESCO (2021), sexual harassment in higher education institutions creates an unsafe learning environment that can negatively affect students' emotional well-being, academic performance, and confidence. Victims of harassment often experience stress, anxiety, and loss of motivation to continue their studies.

As stated by Iloka, and Eze (2022), Chukwuma, (2020) and Iloka (2022), one of the major challenges associated with sexual harassment is the underreporting of such incidents. Many victims are reluctant to report cases because they fear retaliation, stigmatization, or lack of institutional support. As a result, perpetrators may continue their unethical behaviour without facing disciplinary consequences. In the light of this, Ucheagwu-Okoye (2021), Chukwuma (2025) and Anushiem (2025) noted that universities must therefore recognize sexual harassment as a serious ethical issue that requires strong institutional policies and effective reporting mechanisms.

Research Misconduct and Academic Fraud

Research misconduct represents another critical ethical challenge in higher education institutions. Universities are responsible for producing credible research that contributes to scientific knowledge and societal development. However, unethical research practices can undermine the credibility of academic scholarship. According to Ucheagwu-Okoye (2025) and Akpunonu and Eze (2021), research misconduct includes activities such as plagiarism, fabrication of data, falsification of research results, and duplicate publication of academic work. Fabrication involves inventing research data that were never actually collected, while falsification involves manipulating research data to produce desired outcomes.

According to Eaton (2021), the increasing pressure on academics to publish research articles in reputable journals has contributed to the rise of research misconduct in universities. Many academics feel pressured to produce numerous publications in order to secure promotions, research grants, or professional recognition. As stated by Akpunonu, and Eze, (2022) and Eze, and Iloka (2022), research misconduct can have serious consequences because inaccurate research findings may mislead policymakers, researchers, and the general public. In fields such as medicine, engineering, and environmental science, unethical research practices may even lead to harmful outcomes for society. Maintaining research integrity is therefore essential for preserving the credibility of universities and the reliability of scientific knowledge.

Inequality and Discrimination

Discrimination is another ethical challenge that exists within some higher education institutions. Discrimination refers to unfair treatment of individuals based on characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, age, or socio-economic background. According to Anushiem, Anushiem, Nwakoby and Ildigwe (2025), in some universities, students from certain social or ethnic backgrounds may experience unfair treatment in admissions, grading systems, or access to institutional resources. Similarly, female students and staff may face gender-based discrimination that limits their academic and professional opportunities.



According to Altbach and Salmi (2021), discrimination undermines the principles of equality and fairness that should guide higher education systems. When individuals are treated unfairly because of their personal identity or background, it creates barriers to academic success and professional advancement. Discrimination can also occur in staff recruitment and promotion processes. When promotions are based on favouritism rather than merit, it discourages hardworking staff members and weakens institutional morale.

Addressing discrimination is therefore essential for creating inclusive and equitable learning environments in higher education institutions.

Abuse of Academic Authority

The abuse of academic authority is another ethical challenge faced by many universities. Academic staff and administrators often possess significant authority over students, including the power to evaluate academic performance, supervise research projects, and influence students' academic progression. However, some individuals misuse this authority by engaging in unfair practices such as biased grading, intimidation, exploitation of students for personal tasks, or favouritism toward certain students.

According to Okebukola (2020), abuse of academic authority can damage the trust between students and lecturers and create an environment where students feel powerless and discouraged. When students perceive academic evaluation as unfair or biased, it can reduce their motivation to engage in learning. Universities must therefore establish clear accountability mechanisms that ensure academic authority is exercised responsibly and ethically.

Weak Institutional Governance

Weak governance structures also contribute significantly to ethical challenges in higher education institutions. Institutional governance refers to the systems and processes used to manage and regulate university activities. When governance structures are weak or ineffective, unethical practices such as financial mismanagement, corruption, lack of transparency, and poor accountability may occur. According to UNESCO (2021), effective governance is essential for ensuring that universities operate in a transparent, responsible, and ethical manner. Institutions that lack strong governance mechanisms may struggle to enforce ethical policies and disciplinary procedures. Poor governance may also lead to inefficient allocation of institutional resources, inadequate monitoring of academic activities, and failure to address ethical violations promptly.

Lack of Ethical Awareness and Education

Another major challenge in higher education institutions is the lack of adequate awareness about ethical standards among students and staff. Many individuals may engage in unethical behaviour simply because they are not fully aware of institutional ethical guidelines. For example, some students may commit plagiarism unintentionally because they do not understand proper citation and referencing techniques. Similarly, some lecturers may fail to follow ethical guidelines in research or teaching due to insufficient training in academic ethics. According to Bretag (2020), promoting awareness of academic integrity policies is one of the most effective ways to reduce cases of academic misconduct in universities. As rightly noted by Akpunonu, (2025) and Iloka, (2023) and Eze (2022), institutions must therefore invest in ethical education



programs, workshops, and seminars that help students and staff understand their ethical responsibilities within the academic environment.

Pressure for Academic Success and Competition

Another factor contributing to ethical challenges in higher education is the intense pressure for academic success. Students often face high expectations from parents, lecturers, and society to achieve excellent academic results. This pressure may lead some students to engage in unethical practices such as cheating during examinations or copying assignments from others. Similarly, academic staff may feel pressured to publish numerous research articles in order to secure promotions or maintain their professional reputation. According to Eaton (2021), the "publish or perish" culture in academia has contributed to unethical research practices in many universities. Addressing these pressures requires institutions to create supportive academic environments that prioritize learning and integrity over competition.

Solutions to Ethical Issues in Higher Education

Ethical issues in higher education have become a major concern globally because universities and colleges are expected to maintain high standards of integrity, accountability, and professionalism. When ethical standards are compromised, the credibility of the educational system is affected and the quality of graduates produced may decline. Therefore, higher education institutions must implement comprehensive strategies and policies to address ethical challenges and promote ethical behaviour among students, lecturers, administrators, and other stakeholders. The following solutions provide detailed approaches for addressing ethical issues in higher education.

- **Establishment of Clear Ethical Policies and Codes of Conduct**

One of the most effective ways to address ethical issues in higher education is through the establishment of clear ethical policies and codes of conduct. Every institution should develop a comprehensive code of ethics that outlines acceptable standards of behaviour for students, lecturers, and administrative staff.

These ethical policies should clearly define issues such as academic honesty, plagiarism, corruption, sexual harassment, discrimination, abuse of authority, and professional misconduct. By clearly outlining these ethical expectations, members of the academic community will have a better understanding of what constitutes ethical and unethical behaviour.

In addition, institutions should ensure that these policies are communicated effectively to all members of the university community. This can be achieved through student handbooks, staff manuals, orientation programs, and institutional websites. When individuals are fully aware of institutional ethical standards, it becomes easier to hold them accountable for their actions.

Furthermore, ethical policies should not only exist on paper but must be actively enforced. Institutions should regularly review and update their codes of conduct to ensure that they address emerging ethical challenges associated with technological advancement, digital learning environments, and research practices.

- **Strengthening Institutional Governance and Accountability**

Another important solution to ethical issues in higher education is the strengthening of institutional governance and accountability mechanisms. Effective governance ensures that universities operate in a transparent and responsible manner.



University management should implement policies that promote transparency in decision-making processes, financial management, recruitment procedures, and academic administration. This reduces the opportunities for corruption, favoritism, nepotism, and other unethical practices within the institution.

Strong governance structures also involve the establishment of oversight bodies such as ethics committees, disciplinary committees, and audit units. These bodies are responsible for monitoring institutional operations, investigating ethical violations, and ensuring that rules and regulations are followed. In addition, accountability mechanisms such as regular financial audits, internal reviews, and performance evaluations should be implemented to ensure that institutional leaders and staff remain responsible for their actions. When individuals know that their activities are being monitored, they are less likely to engage in unethical behaviour.

Good governance also requires ethical leadership. University administrators and senior academic staff must lead by example by demonstrating integrity, fairness, and transparency in their decisions. Ethical leadership helps to create a culture of accountability within higher education institutions.

- **Promotion of Academic Integrity**

Promoting academic integrity is a fundamental solution to many ethical problems in higher education. Academic integrity refers to the commitment to honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility in academic work.

Universities should actively educate students about the importance of academic integrity and the consequences of academic dishonesty. Many cases of plagiarism and cheating occur because students lack proper knowledge of academic writing, referencing techniques, and research ethics. Institutions should therefore organize workshops and training sessions that teach students how to properly cite sources, conduct research ethically, and avoid plagiarism. These training programs help students develop the skills necessary for producing original academic work. In addition, universities should implement strict examination monitoring procedures to prevent cheating during examinations. The use of technology such as plagiarism detection software can also help institutions identify copied academic work.

Academic integrity policies should also apply to lecturers and researchers. Faculty members must ensure that their teaching and research activities are conducted ethically and that they serve as role models for students.

- **Provision of Ethical Education and Training**

Ethical education and training play an essential role in promoting ethical behaviour in higher education institutions. Universities should provide regular training programs that educate students and staff about ethical values, professional conduct, and responsible decision-making.

These training programs may include seminars, workshops, conferences, and orientation sessions focused on ethical issues such as research ethics, academic honesty, conflict of interest, and professional responsibility.

For students, ethical education helps them understand the moral responsibilities associated with their academic work and future careers. For lecturers and researchers, ethical training ensures that they follow established ethical guidelines when conducting research or interacting with students.



Incorporating ethics education into academic programs can also help students develop critical thinking and ethical reasoning skills. This prepares them to address complex ethical dilemmas both within the academic environment and in their professional lives after graduation.

- **Implementation of Strict Disciplinary Measures**

Another important solution to ethical issues in higher education is the implementation of strict disciplinary measures against individuals who violate ethical standards. Institutions must establish clear disciplinary procedures for handling cases of misconduct.

When ethical violations such as plagiarism, examination malpractice, corruption, sexual harassment, or research fraud occur, appropriate sanctions should be applied to offenders. These sanctions may include suspension, expulsion, demotion, termination of employment, or withdrawal of academic credentials.

Strict enforcement of disciplinary measures serves as a deterrent to others who may consider engaging in unethical behaviour. It also demonstrates that the institution is committed to upholding ethical standards.

However, disciplinary processes must be fair, transparent, and consistent. Accused individuals should be given the opportunity to present their defence, and decisions should be based on thorough investigations conducted by relevant institutional bodies.

- **Encouraging Whistleblowing and Reporting Mechanisms**

The establishment of whistleblowing mechanisms is another effective solution to ethical problems in higher education institutions. Whistleblowing involves reporting unethical or illegal activities within an organization.

Many unethical practices go unreported because students or staff fear retaliation or victimization. Therefore, institutions should create safe and confidential channels through which individuals can report unethical behaviour without fear of negative consequences. Anonymous reporting systems, ethics hotlines, suggestion boxes, and online reporting platforms can help encourage individuals to report misconduct. Institutions should also establish policies that protect whistleblowers from retaliation.

By encouraging reporting of unethical practices, universities can identify problems early and take appropriate corrective actions.

- **Strengthening Research Ethics Committees**

Research activities in universities must adhere to established ethical standards. To ensure this, institutions should establish research ethics committees responsible for reviewing and monitoring research projects conducted by students and faculty members.

These committees evaluate research proposals to ensure that they comply with ethical guidelines, particularly when research involves human participants, sensitive data, or potential risks.

Research ethics committees also ensure that researchers obtain informed consent from participants, protect confidentiality, and avoid data manipulation or falsification.

By strengthening the role of research ethics committees, universities can promote responsible research practices and maintain the credibility of academic research.

- **Improving Student Support Systems**

Many ethical violations among students arise due to academic pressure, stress, financial difficulties, or lack of adequate academic support. Universities can address these issues by improving student support systems.

Providing academic counselling, mentorship programs, tutoring services, and psychological support can help students manage academic challenges without resorting to unethical practices.



Student support services also help identify students who may be struggling academically or emotionally and provide them with the assistance they need to succeed.

When students feel supported and guided by the institution, they are more likely to maintain ethical behaviour in their academic activities.

- **Use of Technology to Promote Ethical Practices**

Technological tools can also be used to reduce unethical practices in higher education institutions. For example, plagiarism detection software can help lecturers identify copied academic work, while digital examination monitoring systems can reduce cheating during online examinations.

Universities can also use digital record management systems to improve transparency in academic records, grading systems, and financial transactions.

The adoption of technology not only helps detect unethical behaviour but also promotes efficiency and accountability within academic institutions.

Conclusion

The ethical issues in higher education have real-world implications that shape the experiences of students, faculty, institutions, and society. Plagiarism, contract cheating, and favouritism in admissions and recognition undermine the credibility of degrees, research, and the ethical development of students and staff. Institutions should prioritize ethics education by incorporating training programs that address plagiarism, research ethics, responsible leadership, and academic integrity for both faculty and students. As online learning grows, institutions must balance privacy, academic integrity, and equity to ensure the fairness of digital education. Faculty play a key role in upholding ethical standards in teaching, research, and governance. However, conflicts of interest, research misconduct, and favouritism in appointments challenge these standards. Institutions must establish and consistently enforce transparent policies to address conflicts of interest, admissions practices, and ethical research conduct. Ethical leadership, transparent governance, and fair decision-making are essential for maintaining institutional credibility.

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