

# The Effect of Postgraduate Students' Academic Cheating in Higher Learning Institutions in Tanzania: Implications and Lessons

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## Abstract

Maintaining academic integrity in higher learning institutions is very important. This is because academic cheating had many effects on students, teachers, individual schools, and the education system at large. The paper investigated the effect of postgraduate students' academic cheating in higher learning institutions in Tanzania with a focus on the implications and lessons. The participants involved postgraduate students (master's degree students) from four universities in two-degree programmes, namely; education and social sciences. Data were collected through focus group discussions. The results show that academic cheating results in incompetent postgraduates, discontinuation from studies, loss of academic credibility and integrity, tarnishing the image of a university, and presence of dishonest employees. If immediate measures are not taken to stop the problem of cheating among postgraduate students, students graduating from postgraduate programmes and their respective higher learning institutions will no longer be trusted by the society. Therefore, this study recommends that a holistic approach should be employed by different parties, including faculty members, students and education stake holders to end this problem so as to maintain the quality of education offered by higher learning institutions.

**Keywords:** Academic cheating, effects, postgraduate students, higher learning institutions, Tanzania

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## 1. Introduction

It is acknowledged both locally and internationally that students' academic dishonesty in learning institutions is at an alarming rate (Martin, Rao & Sloan, 2009; Elander, Pittam, Lusher, Fox & Payne, 2010). It is worried that dishonest students will spill over this unethical behaviour into their jobs as leaders and employees (Nonis & Swift, 2001; Bali, 2015).

Academic cheating is a comprehensive term that is used to describe behaviours or actions that are commonly prohibited by academic institutions as it undermines academic integrity (Strom & Strom, 2007). Each type of academic dishonesty is associated with a particular set of behaviours considered to be unethical and unacceptable (Edgren & Waters, 2006). From the historical perspective, academic dishonesty is steadily increasing in magnitude and sophistication because of the use of a combination of traditional and modern techniques of cheating (Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregory, 2012).

There are four categories of academic dishonesty (Hodges, 2004, Johnson, 2013). The first category is deception, which is an act of providing false information to a teacher or lecturer concerning a formal academic exercise. Examples of this include taking more time on a take-home assignment than is allowed, giving dishonest excuse when asking for a deadline extension, or falsely claiming to have submitted a work (Petress, 2013). The second category of academic dishonesty is called fabrication. This involves falsification of data, information, or citations in any formal academic exercise. Fabrication includes making up citations to back up arguments or inventing quotations. Sometimes it involves falsifying data to make experiments and making false claims about research performed, including selective submission of results to exclude inconvenient data so as to generate bogus data (Johnston, 2012). Another category of academic dishonesty is plagiarism. This involves the submission of someone else's work as one's own original work (in a paper, project, or in an online class discussions board posting) without proper acknowledgement of the source whether the original work is published or unpublished, printed or digital (Johnston, 2012). The last category of academic dishonesty is sabotage. This happens when a student or lecturer prevents others from completing their work. It includes cutting pages out of library books, deleting data off from classmate's computer or otherwise wilfully disrupting the experiments of others (Petres, 2013; Hodges, 2017).

Numerous researches in various contexts supports the notion that postgraduate students' engagement in academic cheating has serious effects on students, institutions and community (Fontana, 2009; Johnson, 2013). The study conducted by Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2005) found that, academic cheating threatens the equity and efficacy of instructional measurement, so that students' relative abilities are not accurately evaluated. Bachore (2014) adds that postgraduate students who cheat probably reduce their level of learning so they are less prepared

for the application of the material presented in a course. At the societal level, Kevin (2011) opines that postgraduate students who do not respect academic integrity while at university will not respect integrity in their future professional and personal relationships. This means that society will experience the impact of high rates of cheating because of the reduced value of the certification or earned award. Thus, the match between the award and the promised skills will not be valid or warranted.

A study conducted in Kenya by Jepngetich, Chebii, Kapigen and Metto (2017) on academic dishonesty among university health science students indicates that, academic cheatings not only affects the quality of the education system, but it is also unfair to those who do not cheat. They further contend that academic cheating causes damage to the society as it results in professionals with poor quality. This occurs when a person lacks professionalism because of lack of the required skills. Another study was conducted in Ethiopia by Desalegn and Berhan (2014) on cheating on examinations and its predictors among undergraduate students at Hawassa University College of Medicine and Health Science. The study revealed that when cheating occurs in medical schools, it has serious consequences for human life, social values, and the economy of the nation. Moreover, there was a study conducted by Boehm, Justice, and Weeks (2009) on promoting academic integrity in higher education. The study revealed that academic cheating costs institutions administrative time, loss of integrity within the school, and student lack of respect for ethics and values. In Malawi, there was a study by Kamuntu (2019) on effects of academic cheating among graduate students in higher institutions. The study revealed that a student who inadvertently plagiarised, for example, might just get a failing grade on an assignment paper, while a student caught deliberately cheating on an exam might fail the class and sometimes might be ordered to repeat the course.

In general, from the literature, it has been shown that academic cheating in higher learning institutions is a real threat to the quality of education as it has tremendous impacts on the students, institutions and the community in general. Institutions are urged to develop practices that foster and develop academic integrity among students. In Tanzania, little is known about the effects of postgraduate students' academic cheating in higher learning institutions. This paper therefore aims to fill the gap in the literature by addressing the following questions: How does academic cheating affect individual postgraduate students? How are higher learning institutions affected by postgraduate students' academic cheating? How is the society affected by postgraduate students' academic cheating?

## **2. Methodology**

The study was designed to investigate the effects of postgraduate students' academic cheating in higher learning institutions in Tanzania with a focus on implications and lessons. The study employed the qualitative approach as a method of inquiry. Specifically, data were collected through focus group discussions. The qualitative approach was chosen in order to gain an understanding of the feelings and experience of graduate students, regarding the effect of academic cheating in higher learning institutions in Tanzania. Focus group discussion was chosen as a data collection tool because it helped the researcher to gather information from the shared discussion. Likewise, FGDs consist of homogeneous members who are likely to produce a lot of information quickly through the questions posed to the respondents. Data for the study were collected from three regions namely; Dar es Salaam, Dodoma and Iringa. These regions were purposively selected because they have a good number of both private and public universities, which offer various degree programmes. The participants were drawn from four universities. The degree programmes selected were education, and social sciences. A total of 8 focus group discussions were conducted in four universities. Each group consisted of ten participants. The information from the focus group discussions was audio recorded and later on transcribed verbatim.

The data were analysed using the thematic approach as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013), whereby appropriate themes were identified, described and illustrated by the quotes of participants. Earlier on, before commencing data collection, research permit was obtained from the Open University of Tanzania. Thereafter, informed consent to conduct the study was also obtained from the respective authorities and universities. Confidentiality of the information gathered and anonymity of the respondents were ensured.

## **3. Results**

Several issues emerged from the focus group discussions regarding the effects of postgraduate students' academic cheating in higher learning institutions in Tanzania. These are organised into five themes, which include incompetence, postgraduate students discontinuation from studies, loss of academic credibility and integrity, tarnishing of universities' image, and spilling over of cheating behaviour into working places. These are discussed below.

### **3.1 Incompetence among postgraduate students**

Academic cheating creates students and graduates who are incompetent in their fields of specialisation. Most of the postgraduate students who participated in the focus group discussions revealed that students who cheat in academics graduate with poor skills in their areas of specialisation. The postgraduate students gave the following

explanations:

We go to school for the purpose of getting skills which are supposed to be obtained legally. But when a student commits academic cheating of whatsoever forms it is very difficult for her/ him to acquire the important skills. In short, a postgraduate student becomes incompetent (FGD, student of university D).

Currently, any job that a graduate applies for requires him/her to appear for an interview. The question is, what will he/she respond to the interviewers if he/she knows nothing? That is why you can find a postgraduate student with a good GPA but there is nothing in his head (FGD, student of university C).

What I can say is that, academic cheating in higher learning institutions has many effects, one which being production of incompetent graduates. This in turn affects the quality of services that they are expected to offer to the community (FGD, student of university A).

Academic cheating in higher learning institutions results into having unproductive students who know nothing and who are of no use to the society (FGD, student of university B).

These testimonies show that academic cheating has negative impacts to the education system and the society at large. Through academic cheating, postgraduate students lack skills which are very important for their professions. Consequently, when these graduates fail to deliver in their work places, the society become disappointed.

### ***3.2 Discontinuation from studies***

The second theme which was mentioned by the respondents as one of the effects of post graduate students' engagements in academic dishonesty in higher learning institutions was discontinuation from studies. The respondents explained that universities have strict regulations guiding academic conduct have zero tolerance on academic cheating. As such, students who are confirmed to have cheated in academics are discontinued from studies. The students argued as follows:

What I see is that, academic dishonesty is very risky to any postgraduate student who practices it. This is because once one is caught one will end up being discontinued from studies. This is painful as all the time and resources you have spent at the university become wasted (FGD, student of university A).

I perceive academic cheating as very bad to those postgraduate students who are engaged in it. This is because it often ends up with discontinuation from studies. This is shameful not only to the students themselves but also to the societies where they come from (FGD, student of university B).

### ***3.3 Loss of academic credibility and integrity***

The third theme regarding the effect of academic cheating among postgraduate students in higher learning institutions that was mentioned by the respondents was loss of academic credibility and integrity. It should be noted that the missions of higher learning institutions are to prepare students who are credible and who will be able to maintain their integrity. From a psychological perspective, a student who cheats in academics loses credibility and academic integrity. Consequently, he/she cannot demonstrate the importance of education in the society. Some of the respondents gave the following explanations:

It is very important to understand that when we cheat in academics, we lose academic integrity. Remember that some of us are future teachers, so how are we going to teach our students to maintain academic integrity while we were part of academic dishonesty? (FGD, student of university A).

When a postgraduate student is caught cheating the university never trusts him/ her again. A dishonesty student will be labelled by the entire university community and as a result, the mutual trust between the students and the entire university will collapse (FGD, student of university C).

### ***3.4 Tarnishing the image of the university***

Universities are recognised worldwide as centers of truth, ethics, and quality academic output. They are centers for quality intellectual inquiry, knowledge generation and sharing, and production of credible graduates. The study findings show that when postgraduate students engage into academic cheating the image of the university is tarnished, as respondents explained:

Running universities is both a business and a service. Universities needs students so that can they can gain income. But if a university has scandals of academic cheating, parents or guardians will not send their children to such a university (FGD, student of university D).

A university is likely to collapse if academic cheating prevails. This is because the image of the university will be destroyed and consequently people will not trust it (FGD, student of university B).

### **3.5 Cheating behaviour spilling over into working places**

The findings from the study revealed that postgraduate students who are engaged in academic cheating, tend to continue with their dishonest behaviour even at their working places. This is because they have been practicing it for a long time and thus, they find it difficult to stop. Some of the students who participated in the study gave the following explanations:

You know what? When I cheat here at the college it is obvious that I will continue with this behaviour even when I am employed. This is because I will be accustomed to this behaviour. And I don't think if employer will tolerate such behaviour (FGD, student of university A).

A student who is dishonest will not be employable. This is because an employer prefers an honest employee who will carry out the organization's activities in very good manner (FGD, student of university D).

It is evident that academic cheating has a profound effect on postgraduate students' world of employment. Employers always seek to employ an honesty person for the betterment of the organisation. Therefore, it is important for postgraduate students to maintain academic integrity.

## **4. Discussion**

This study found that academic cheating affects the provision of postgraduate education in higher learning institutions in Tanzania in various ways. One of the effects is that it results into production of unskilled and incompetent graduates. The findings further indicated that academic cheating jeopardises academic professionalism. The findings are in line with Rozzet *et al.* (2011) who reported that academic dishonesty weakens the effectiveness of education institutions and prevents postgraduates from achieving skills. The findings also are in line with Desalegn and Berhan (2014) who argue that, continuous cheating in higher learning institutions among graduate students, allows less knowledge to be acquired by the students towards a career field. The findings also revealed that academic cheating results students' discontinuation from studies. This is because some of the universities have zero tolerance on students who are engaged in academic cheating. Stephen (2018) maintains that academic dishonesty is a serious breach of the rules of proper academic conduct and as a result, a student can be expelled from the college if and only if it has been confirmed beyond reasonable doubt that he/she was engaged in that academic cheating. Similarly, Dean (2015) argues that a postgraduate student found guilty of any academic integrity offense may lose his/ her eligibility for college honors and awards.

Moreover, the majority of postgraduate students who participated in the study acknowledged that involvement in academic cheating, lead to loss academic credibility and integrity. This is because the expectation of higher learning institutions and the society is not achieved. Similar findings are reported by Philemon (2014) who argues that when a postgraduate student cheats in academics, he/she loses the quality of being trusted and believed in. Rindsley (2009) adds that academic cheating among postgraduate students is not good because students lack commitment to important academic values, namely; honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage.

Furthermore, the study findings show that academic cheating among postgraduate students tarnishes the image of their universities. Universities are regarded centres of academic truth and honesty but cases of cheating lower the status of the university. These findings correlate the findings by Nick (2019) who argued that good images of higher learning institutions are being tarnished because of failure to clamp down cheating behaviours among the students. Lastly, the findings indicate that cheating behaviour is carried over to work places and results into having employees who cannot be trusted. Brown and Choong (2005) found that graduate students who are involved in academic dishonesty in medical schools are likely to falsify patient records in a clinical setting. This shows that this dishonest behaviour is transferred from school to working places. Additionally, Diaz (2012) maintains that students who are dishonest in class are likely to engage in fraud and theft on the job when they enter the workplace. In Tanzania, the study conducted by Bali (2015) concluded that a student who cheats while at school continue to cheat at the working places.

## **5. Conclusion**

Generally, academic cheating affects individual postgraduate students, academic institutions and to the society at large. Society depends more on students who have ethics and will be able to fit in the society. It is high time now that collaborative efforts involving all education stakeholders are needed to curb the academic dishonesty problem that prevail in universities so as to build the credible students who will be trusted by the community. If this is not done, the quality of our education status will be at stake.

## **6. Recommendations**

Basing on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made. Firstly, rules and regulations concerning academic integrity should be strengthened by imposing zero tolerance on academic dishonesty in universities. Second, since academic dishonesty is a big threat for the entire academic activities of the universities,

its intervention requires university-wide proactive and reactive responses to postgraduate students, lecturers, and university administration. Third, lecturers are supposed to discuss with their students on how to maintain academic integrity. This will help postgraduate students to understand their roles and responsibilities concerning academic integrity while they are at university.

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