



## Mitigating student related academic corruption in Sub-Sahara Africa

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### ABSTRACT

Empirical scholarly work on student related academic corruption in higher education in sub-Sahara Africa is scanty. This study contributes to filling the gap. An anonymous self administered online questionnaire was used and emails sent to students from the database of the All-Africa Students Union, University of Burundi Doctoral School and 2nd Year Banking and Finance students of the University of Professional Studies Accra. Researcher observations was also employed to corroborate participant responses. With a sample of n=164, percentages and graphs were generated for analysis. Anchored on the Bad Apple Theory, the research suggests that, the most prevalent form of student related academic corruption is plagiarism (75.6%) with the least being 'falsification of entry results' (45.1%). The originality value of this research is hinged on the empirical findings on the phenomena from respondents' direct experiences, and media reports of specific instances of the phenomena. We recommend appropriate measures to curb the menace.

**Keywords:** Academic corruption, Africa, Students

### RÉSUMÉ

Les travaux empiriques sur la corruption académique des étudiants dans l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique subsaharienne sont rares. Cette étude contribue à combler ce vide. Un questionnaire en ligne auto-administré anonyme a été utilisé et des e-mails ont été envoyés aux étudiants à partir de la base de données de l'Union panafricaine, de l'école doctorale de l'Université du Burundi et des étudiants de 2e année en banque et finance de l'Université des études professionnelles d'Accra. Les observations des chercheurs ont également été utilisées pour corroborer les réponses des participants. Avec un échantillon de 164 étudiants, des pourcentages et des graphiques ont été générés. Ancrée dans la théorie de la mauvaise pomme, la recherche suggère que la forme la plus répandue de corruption universitaire liée aux étudiants est le plagiat (75,6%), le moins étant la «falsification des résultats d'entrée» (45,1%). L'originalité de cette recherche repose sur les résultats empiriques sur les phénomènes tirés des expériences directes des répondants et sur les rapports des médias concernant des cas spécifiques de ces phénomènes. Nous recommandons des mesures appropriées pour endiguer la menace.

**Mots clés:** Corruption académique, Afrique, Etudiants'

## **INTRODUCTION**

The massification in higher education comes with it attended plethora of problems including academic corruption (Macfarlane *et al.*, 2014). The expansion is partly in response to the development of knowledge economies and developing nations like Africa are only supportable in the long-term if there are ethical standards of conduct among members of the academic community: students, policy makers, faculty, administrators, industry and regulatory bodies. It appears that the labour market attracts graduates with very good academic grades as opposed to examining their competence to perform. This culture has heightened the demands for excellent certification with good grades rather than education with the intention to develop competencies. In conformance to this culture, students have devised strategies to enhance their grades to meet the demands of the labour market. Most of these strategies adopted are unethical and tantamount to academic corruption.

The phenomenon of academic corruption recurrently appear in the global news media, undermining the reputation and good standing of academic institutions and their stakeholders (Macfarlane *et al.*, 2014). Academic corruption reflects every aspect of unethical practices that seek to gain unfair advantage pertaining to the academic community. This relates to all forms of unethical academic activities and/or behaviors that undermines academic integrity as demonstrated by academic stakeholders. Student related academic corruption thus refers to every form of unethical practices that students embark upon to gain undue advantage in an academic enterprise. Globally, regular forms of academic corruption include, plagiarism, cheating in examinations, grade buying/selling, impersonation, hacking of institutional IT systems to alter student academic records, filling in after examinations, outsourcing of thesis, assignments and projects.

Eckstein (2003) notes that academic corruption encompasses among other aspects, degree and paper mills, system-wide bribery, facilitation of impersonation, plagiarism, and many other forms of academic misconduct. The reoccurrences of such practices has made the phenomenon a global issue (Macfarlane *et al.*, 2014). The situation has bedeviled many nations and Africa's higher education is not immune to these concerns. In recent times, the myriad of reported incidence of academic corruption in African universities has resulted in the quest to undertake this study and to unravel best practices to curb the situation. The underlying necessity for the research is hinged on new media evidences that, student related academic corruption is on the rise on the continent.

For instance in Ghana, the University of Professional Studies – Accra (UPSA) dismisses 22 students for hacking into the University's system to change their grades; University of Ghana in partnership with the Bureau of National Investigation (BNI) arrested 20 students for allegedly hacking into the university system to change their exams results; students of Kumasi Polytechnic sacked for using fake West African Examination Certificate results.

Student related academic corruption is mostly not done in isolation by students – sometimes it is done in collaboration with university staff (lecturers, invigilators etc). For instance, some staff and administrators of the Accra based Wisconsin International University College (WIUC) were implicated by the university's leadership for selling grades to students.

These reported cases in the public domain coupled with unreported cases are on the rise and the situation is becoming worrisome in Africa's higher education. This gives room for worry that, Africa's performance, image and ranking in higher education globally may be negatively affected by the proliferation of academic

corruptions issues if measures are not taken to curb it. Sadly of the many researches that are done in Africa on academic corruption, little attention has been given to the media reportage on the issues from a student perspective coupled with empirical studies from students who are directly involved in the menace.

This reasoning finds support in the works of Macfarlane *et al.* (2014) that academic corruption has emerged as an area of scholarly and policy-based interest among stakeholders in the academic community in Africa. Notwithstanding, little empirical studies have yet been conducted, especially in emerging and newly developed higher education systems.

It is against this backdrop that the current study becomes much relevant as the research seeks to unravel the factors that triggers the phenomenon from an empirical regional view point and from African student's perspectives to recommend practical measures to forestall its occurrences in the region.

The research begins with an introduction, brief literature review of academic corruption and theoretical underpinning, methodology, presentation and discussion of findings, recommendations, conclusions and suggestion for future research.

**What exists in literature.** Corruption is the abuse of entrusted power for personal gain or for the benefit of a group to which one owes allegiance (Stapenhurst and Langseth, 1997). This definition reflects circular corruption in everyday life. Its scope does not reflect the academic environment, thus there is need to understand what corruptions entails in an academic environment.

Yang (2015) localizes the concept from a Chinese view point; the term academic corruption in mainland China usually refers to such violations as misrepresenting one's

educational background or work experience, plagiarism, distortion of research data, affixing one's name to someone else's publications, and making false commercial advertisements, as well as other acts.

From the above discussions, it will be inferred that, academic corruption is such a large phenomenon which cannot be limited by a single definition or limited view point. It has therefore become necessary to digest the phenomenon from a specific view point: higher education.

#### **Academic corruption in higher education.**

Heyneman (2004) provided an overview of the categories of corruption in higher education and distinguished between corruption in selection, corruption in accreditation, corruption in procurement, professional misconduct, and corruption in educational property and taxes. Altbach (2004) covers this deficit by differentiating between professorial corruption and corruption in examinations. The first group includes favoritism in hiring and promotion, whereas the second category includes paying bribes for examination grades. It is the second categorization of Altbach's definition which defines this work since it has direct bearing on student related academic corruption. Emphasizing on its existence globally, Janashia (2004) described corruption in higher education in the Republic of Georgia that occurs in admissions, regular examinations, and in the process of private tutoring. Private tutoring as identified by Janashia (2004) seem a regular practice in educational corruption in many parts of the world.

In Africa, it is not uncommon to hear or read about lecturers having private tutoring for specific class of students. These categories of students usually agree to pay special sums of money to the lecturers outside of the regular tuition fees. In most instances, there are suggestions that examination questions are made known to these students ahead of time;

giving them an edge over their colleagues.

Corruption in higher education is by no account a new phenomenon. It was commonplace in medieval universities, including in Bologna and the Sorbonne (Osipian, 2004). Corruption may be found not only in colleges, but in doctoral education as well (Osipian, 2010). This has become so especially in institution of higher learning in Africa where the requirement for lecturers to remain in employment is to earn a terminal degree. Many faculty would therefore find fishy and unethical means of meeting this requirement by engaging in diverse forms of academic corruption.

Corruption in higher education is often considered more detrimental than corruption in other sectors because of its long-term effects. Not only does corruption hinder equal access to quantity and quality of education, it is harmful to society as businesses and employers find that many college and university graduates do not have the proper skills to compete in the real world (McCornac, 2012).

**Factors that promote academic corruption.**

Factors such as greed, competition for promotions, faculty demands and personal ambitions have contributed to the rise of academic corruption in higher education.

As Ararat Osipian has noted, limited “*access to education in Nigeria contributed to the use of bribes and personal connections to gain coveted places at universities, with some admissions officials reportedly working with agents to obtain bribes from students. Those who have no ability or willingness to resort to corruption face lost opportunities and unemployment.*” (Osipian, 2013).

The main causes of academic corruption are students’ poor study habits and poor entry qualifications, Dimkpa, (2011) adds. Dimkpa’s opinion seem interesting and speaks more

to this research. Unlike in the past, recent happenings seem to suggest that, students in higher educational institutions are keener for certificates than knowledge. This leads to many unethical practices that aptly constitute academic corruption.

Entry into higher educational institutions has become one of the most corrupt practices in recent times. Osipian (2010) posits that, in a survey conducted by the Institute of Social and Political Psychology of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences in 2006 which targeted students in the leading educational centers of the country, including Kiev, Kharkov, Donetsk, Lviv, and Odessa, the following responses were obtained to the question “How in your opinion has the situation with corruption in entering higher education institutions changed compared to the previous years?”. Around 20 percent of the respondents indicate that they know of the cases of bribery, but the number of such cases has declined; around 27 percent of students said that bribes were accepted by the faculty members at about the same level, as they were in previous years and that nothing has changed; 7 to 8 percent think that bribery is now flourishing. The number of students who admitted paying bribes for entering the college or university declined from 19 percent in 2005 to 13 percent in 2006 (ibid). The ensuing is a very obvious reflection of the level of student related academic corruption in institutions of higher learning.

**Theoretical underpinnings of the study.** The study adopted the Bad Apple Theory. The theory primarily focus on the individual as the cause of corruption in the world. The theory postulates that corruption exist because we have people with immoral traits and these group of people are called ‘bad apples’ (De Graaf, 2007). Graaf (2003) opines that “there is a causal chain from bad character to corrupt acts; the root cause of corruption is found in defective human character and predisposition toward criminal activity.”

This theory also argues the causes of corruption is linked with human weaknesses like greed. The theory also postulates that when the concentration is on the defective characters of an office holder, morality then begin to regulate behavior. By the postulations of this theory, people engage in academic corruption because they have defective behaviors that influence their actions.

Similarly, Klitgaard (1988: 70) states, “if the benefits of corruption minus the probability of being caught times its penalties are greater than the benefits of not being caught, then an individual will rationally choose to be corrupt.” In this theory, the actions of people who engage in corrupt activities is influenced by rationality and deliberate weighing of options by the perpetrators.

This theory shall be used in this study because it helps explain why students engage in academic corruption in higher education institutions in Africa. Another reason for adopting this theory is that it has a close focus. Schinkel (2004:11) states that “Instead of looking for general determining factors, it concentrates on a specific situation of an agent (a corrupt official) who calculates pros and cons.”

## METHODOLOGY

**Research design.** The study employed a quantitative approach to assess the phenomenon of academic corruption to identify the level of existence of student related academic corruption and suggested interventions and best practices in some African universities to solve the menace. The population of the study comprised undergraduate students in sub-Sahara African universities.

**Sample and procedure.** An anonymous, self-administered online questionnaire was distributed to students from the database of the All-Africa Students Union, University of Burundi Doctoral School and 2nd

Year Banking and Finance students of the University of Professional Studies in Accra, Ghana. In this method, which belongs to the category of probability sampling techniques, sample members are selected on the basis of a random procedure. 164 valid questionnaires were returned (n=164) and analyzed. Random sampling was used to select respondents for this research. Also, researcher observation was employed for firsthand information on use of CCTV cameras to check exam malpractice, and existence of posters for contract writing on university campuses.

The survey instrument was pre-tested with students’ participants. The survey was pre-tested with Internet Explorer version 4.0, Windows 10, and two types of Internet access (wifi and ethernet). Three different Internet service providers (MTN, Airtel Tigo and Vodafone) were also used for the pretesting. The pilot test did not uncover any technical problems. However, minor internet fluctuations at intervals were observed. 164 valid questionnaires were returned (n=164) and analyzed.

One key instrument was used for this study – Curbing Student Related Academic Corruption Questionnaire (CSRACQ).

**Curbing Student Related Academic Corruption Questionnaire (CSRACQ).** The questionnaire was drafted and reviewed by 10 experts in the area of Quality Assurance in higher education. The drafting and review of the questionnaire took three weeks.

**Methods of data analysis.** The preliminary findings of the study were presented and discussed for inputs at the 9th and 10th International Conferences on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Africa in Ghana in 2017 and in Cameroun in 2018.

The data from the final study was analysed using google forms to present the information

in tables, percentages and frequencies. Content analytical technique was used in discussing patterns, themes and drawing conclusions from the study.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

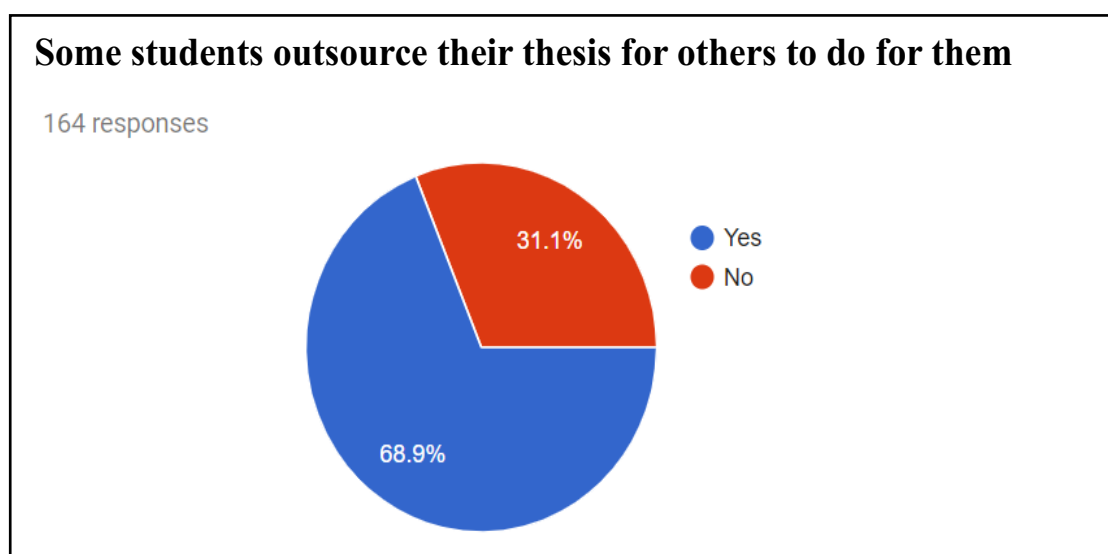
The study suggests that the perception of academic corruption is renowned and prevalent amongst students in Africa's higher education. Critical among the findings of the research and reasons students get into such practices are discussed.

The phenomenon of projects contractors is gaining momentum in Africa's higher education. This is a situation where contractors accepts to write thesis, dissertation and project work for students for fees. Enquiries into whether students outsource thesis revealed an overwhelming 68.9% (see Figure1) answering Yes, showing the extent to which this practice is prevalent on university campuses. Respondents noted that, they outsource academic writing because they lack the requisite writing skills and academic writing seem difficult to them. This finds coherence with the works of Awaah (2020a) that while efforts are made by African universities to ensure the enabling environment in terms of classroom infrastructure, lectures, libraries, security and other factors which may inhibit learning are made relatively adequate for

the conducive study, students usually will have difficulty in understanding some concepts within the period of study. Researcher observer on the participant response further revealed posters advertising services of academic contractors on walls trees and notice boards of selected universities. This practice may be as a result of universities not introducing academic writing very early in the academic journey of students. Most universities have academic writing introduced after the second year, by which time student had gone through the wrong ethics of achieving academic writing – outsourcing

Responding to the question “Some student outsource their thesis for others to do for them” an overwhelming 68.9% answered Yes, revealing the extent to which this practice is prevalent on campuses. Observations on a number of campuses reveals that, the situation has resulted in some contractors circulating flyers and promotional materials to attract sizeable number of students for such practices glaringly on the notice boards of many African universities. The essence of making students do projects or write long essay or even take home assignments has been lost as contractors are now seen championing this agenda on behalf of students for their selfish ambitions.

**Plagiarism.** We found 75.6% of respondents



**Figure 1. Responses on whether students outsource their thesis**

agreeing that students plagiarize in undertaking their academic work. Szabo and Underwood (2004) report that the internet has aided plagiarism among students and that students could easily use the internet to copy and paste information without referencing. The problem of plagiarism is growing in universities. A 2011 survey of over 1000 college Presidents in the US revealed that 55 percent thought that plagiarism was on the rise. Business Schools such as those at UCLA and Penn State have recently begun scanning the admission essays of their MBA applicants because of the scale of the problem (Parker *et al.*, 2011). This could be as a result of students not knowing the implications of the crime related with plagiarism. Also, Most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) do not have plagiarism software's for checking students' assignments and activities.

**Hacking of IT systems.** Evidences from this research reveals that, though there is prevalence of this in African universities, it is not very dominant as suggested by the figures (48.8%) agreeing to its existence. This is supported by Underwood and Szabo (2003), that there is a positive correlation between the increased use of technology in education settings and

academic corruption. This implies that as the use of technology in the administration of school systems increases, there is the tendency of increase in the hacking of the system by students and other administrators.

Further evidence suggests that some twenty persons of the University of Ghana were interdicted by the Bureau of National Investigations (BNI) for an attempt to compromise the school IT system in their favour. Furthermore, the University of Professional Studies in Accra also dismissed twenty students for attempting to hack into the school's IT system to change their grades. Hacking of IT systems of universities may be as a result of weak IT infrastructure of the universities and increased IT knowledge of students.

**Falsification of entry results.** The study also found that students sometimes falsify their results in order to gain admission into various higher education institutions in Africa (45.1%) as shown in figure 4 above. Some university officials do collaborate with such students to aid them in falsifying their results. For instance, twelve students from the Kumasi Technical University were sacked from the institution for

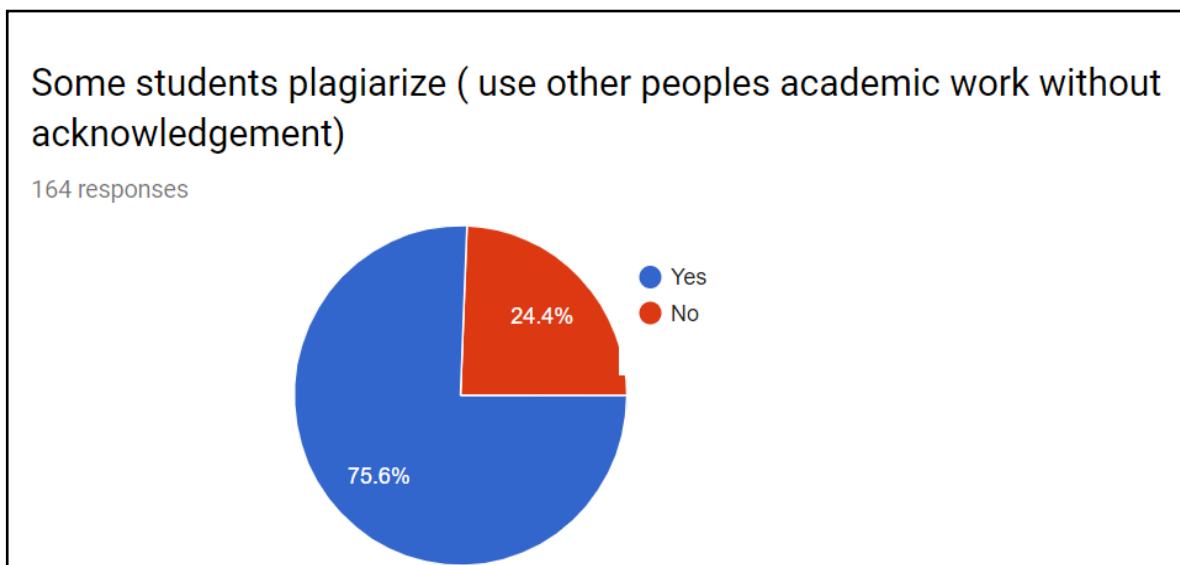
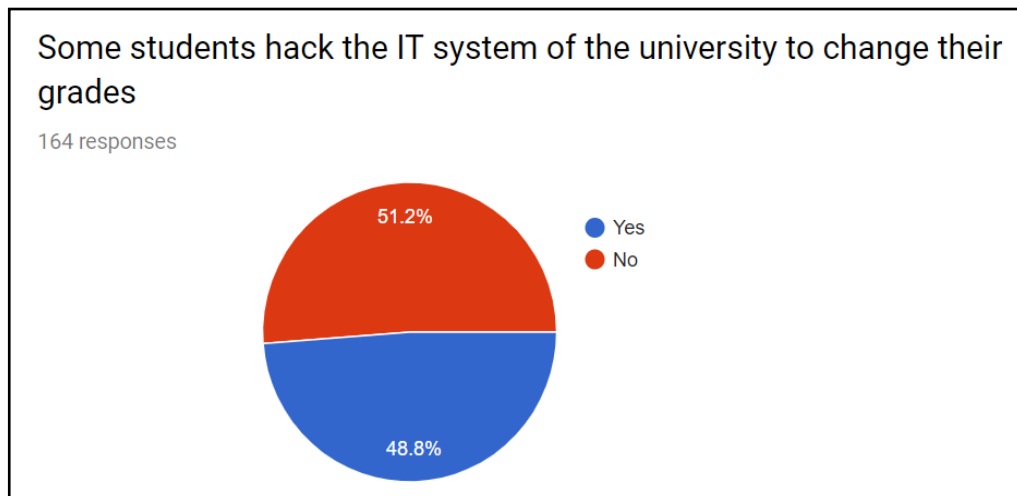


Figure 2. Responses on whether students Plagiarise



**Figure 3. Responses on whether students hack IT systems of universities to change Grades**

falsifying entry results from the West Africa Senior Secondary Certificate Examination. This findings is in line with the works of Chapman and Lindner (2016) that the impact of corrupt practices in higher education can have a wider negative influence to the extent that it breaks the link between personal effort and anticipation of reward.

The polarization of technology in the administration of higher education has aided the falsification of entry results. This takes the form of the usage of computer software to alter results in order to gain admissions into institutions of higher education.

**Cheating in exams.** Figure 5 indicates that 76.2% of the respondents agreed that cheating in examination is common in their universities. This takes the form of students making notes on their skin and also smuggling of pieces of papers with notes into the examination centers.

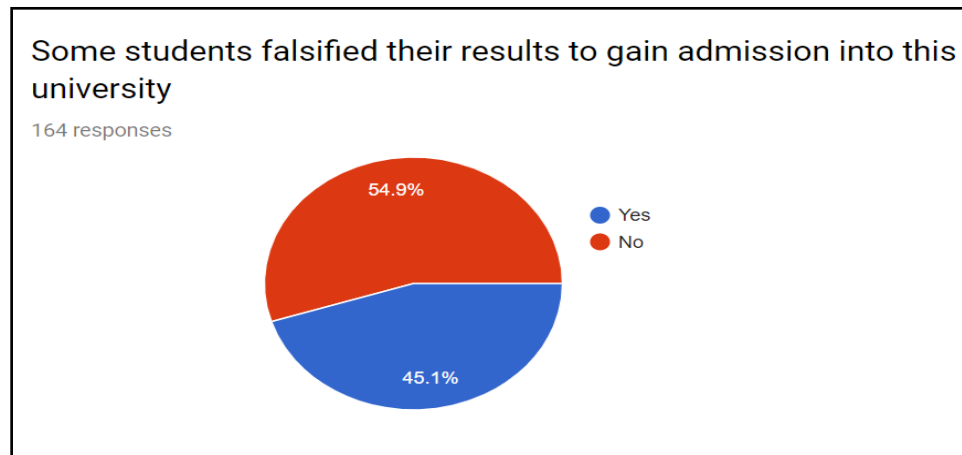
Again, with the invention of mini technological devices such as programmed wrist watches, and calculators has aided in the storing of notes which students take into examination halls. Johns (2003) found that university students engaged in massive cheating in exams he administered on them. He further reported that

discussions in the course of the examination, looking up answers in textbooks, copying from colleagues where among other practices the students engaged in during the course of the exams. His findings find coherence with a survey by Awaah (in press) that, the top most occurring form of students related academic corrupt practice is students communicating with or copying from any other student during an examination by exchanging answers sheets with the view of getting answers to questions representing 52.8% of responses on the survey of ranking student related academic corruption in Ghana.

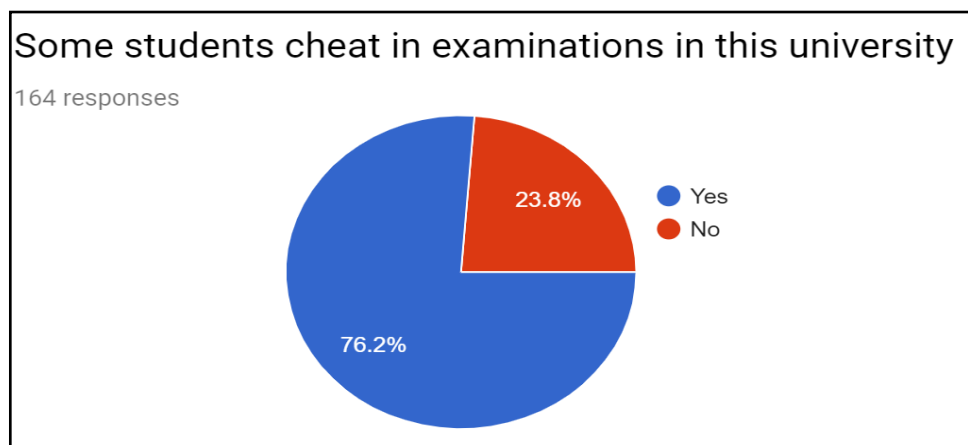
It is noteworthy that these findings are in sync with the results of this study that cheating during examinations abound in the sub Saharan Africa context. McCabe and Trevino's (1993) for instance suggest that students who do not cheat during examinations feel disadvantaged. In the UK over 17,000 cases of cheating were recorded at universities in 2009–2010, an increase of 50 percent from four years previously (Barrett, 2011).

**Grade buying.** The study further found that grade buying is one of the forms of academic corruption dominant in African universities as depicted in figure 6 above. Sometimes,





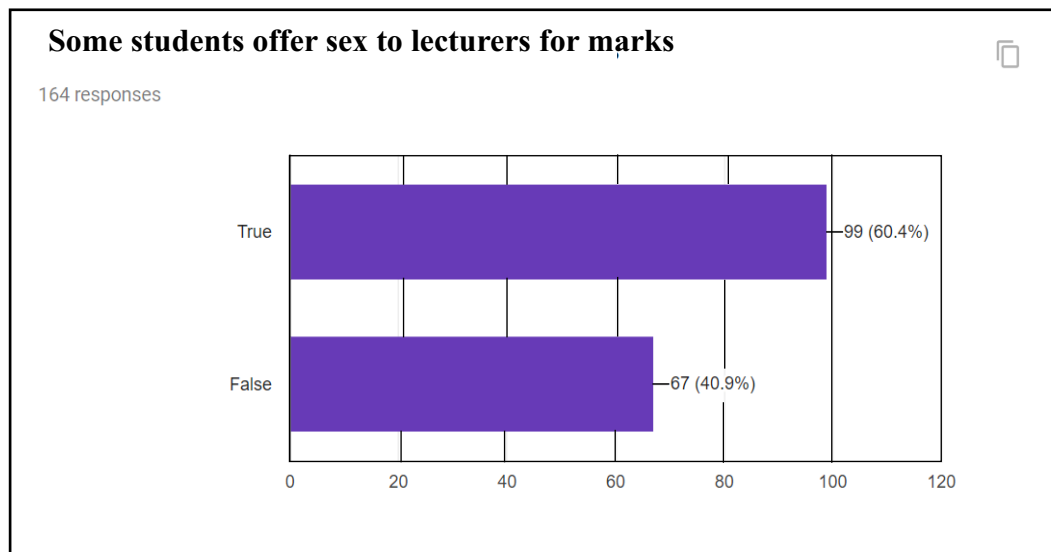
**Figure 4. Responses on whether students falsify entry results into universities**



**Figure 5. Responses on whether students cheat in Examinations**

instead of cash payments to the faculty, students offer sexual intercourse in exchange of a pass grade as evidenced in this research (60.4%) of participants responded yes to the statement “Some students offer sex to lecturer for marks”). In most instances, faculty being aware that the scripts may be vetted by university management for unfair award of grades, allows students to fill in blank spaces to cover their deeds. Others collide with schools administrators and lecturers in altering their grades. For instance, it has been reported that specific staff and administrators of Accra based Wisconsin International University College have been accused by the University’s authorities for selling grades to students.

In a different dimension, Altbach (2013), posits that professors and administrators connive with students by selling them the examination papers in advance or by fixing the results. This finding is however in line with the results that students go the extent of buying the conscious of professors and administrators in changing their grades. In Georgia, there are reports of professors handing out price lists for passing exams. A student can buy his or her way through the institution, paying for every examination and, ultimately, a diploma. Moreover, students can bypass the higher education system altogether by simply buying a diploma from an established university (Meier, 2004).



**Figure 6. Responses on whether students buy grades in universities**

Particular in respect of sexually related grade buying, Awaah (2020b) posits that sometimes, this sexual barter for grades is not as a result of genuine trade between the lecturer and student, yet in those instances, only 20.5% of respondents will not report lecturers who demand sex for grades.

**Policy recommendations.** To mitigate the menace of student related academic corruption in Africa's institutions of higher learning, a number of policy drives and good practices have been suggested for implementation.

**Honour code.** This has to do with individuals making personal pledges to abide by rules and regulations governing the conduct of examinations and personally responsible for flouting those rules. As a best practice, institutions of higher educations should develop and implement honour codes to serve as check on the academic activities of both students and officials. This can help lessen academic corruption by lauding students who have diligently observed rules and regulations laid down in the codes.

Suggestions from the 9th ICQAHEA held

from 18<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2017 Accra, Ghana and the 10th ICQAHEA in Yaoundé revealed that, Asheshi university in Ghana is using this code to effectively curbing the menace, thus worth replicating at other institutional, national and continental levels. Searcher observation of these suggestions was corroborated by visits of the researchers to the university. Benchmarking from the Asheshi experience, this recommendation will need the collaborative efforts of students and institutions of higher learning.

**Software.** Anti-plagiarism software developed to track students' assignments and other academic works is recommended as a measure of curbing student related academic corruption. This can be made possible by students submitting assignments and theses electronically to check for plagiarism. Opinions from the 9th and 10th ICQAHEA suggest that, the University of Ghana has used this and it's proven efficient in managing the menace.

**Technologies.** Despite the fact that technology happens to be the major tool that aids in the practice of academic corruption, it can be used to lessen if not eradicate the practice of academic

dishonesty among students and academics. This can be achieved by the installation of CC TV cameras in the examination rooms to aid in the easy detection of cheating during examination. Cursory examination researcher observations of the Ghanaian system reveals that, the Laweh Open University College uses cameras for invigilating examinations and it has proven efficient. This is recommended for replication in all universities within sub-Sahara Africa.

**Encourage conference marking.** To curb the possibilities of students compromising lecturers with money and sex for grades, it is recommended that lecturers are made to mark scripts at an agreed venue (hall) in the university. This will check the tendency of lecturers conniving with students to fill in blank spaces pre-agreed with lecturer for the purposes of awarding unfair marks. Researcher observation at the University of Professional Studies – Accra reveals that, this method has been implemented and its proven effective. Replicating same for sub-Sahara African universities will help curb student related academic corruption.

**Introduce scholarly writing at the commencement of university education.** Introducing scholarly writing helps in curbing the fraud related with academic writings such as plagiarism. When students are introduced to scholarly writing at a very early age, they get to understand the consequences of not adhering to the rules, thus compelling them to avoid such crimes. Laweh Open University College has successfully adopted this model for its students per the researcher observations to that university.

**Punishment.** Punishing students who are engaged in academic corruption will serve as a deterrent to other students, thus helping curb the menace on African campuses.

**Review mode of teaching and learning.** Teaching and learning in a number of African

universities are very outmoded; requiring students to memorize and reproduce the same material in examination. This seem to encourage academic fraud since student's inability to memorize leads to cheating. It is recommended that teaching be made in more applied and practical forms, allowing students the flexibility of using initiatives by applying knowledge rather than reproducing knowledge.

**Reduce class size for examination.** The convenience to cheat in examinations is usually fuelled by sitting proximity of students to each other. In response, African universities should ensure the class sizes for examinations are reduced and students sparsely distributed to ensure they are unable to communicate to each other either verbally or non-verbally.

**Contributions to comparative and international higher education.** From an African perspective the research introduces acts that may not be considered academic corruption in other environs as a result of cultural and systemic factors that ensure conformance to acts deviant by students in this paper considered academically corrupt by students. This contributes to comparative and international higher education in a way that pulls from the empirical evidences of other forms of academic dishonesty from the developing world which may not existent in the developed world. This gives room for a relook at the concept from a broader perspective in comparative and international higher education.

## CONCLUSION

Student related academic corruption is widespread among students in African universities and its prevalence is largely as a result of the quest for students to make good grades in order to fulfil the grade expectations of the labour market. To respond to this, academic stakeholders would largely need to harmonize their efforts toward reexamining the mode of

teaching, learning and examining students in African universities.

We conclude that, practitioners of higher education have key roles in curbing the canker of student related academic corruptions in Africa's higher education space. Prescribed measures include honour codes, anti-plagiarism software, Close Circuit Cameras in class rooms during examinations, conference marking by lecturers, and the arrest and prosecution of thesis contractors who have notices on campuses.

**Suggestions for future research.** Considering that a gender twist to this study has not been thoroughly examined, it is recommended that future studies will examine the relationships between female student seduction on male lecturers and academic corruption in Africa universities.

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#### **STATEMENT OF NO-CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this paper.

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