

# Abuse of Office and Neglect of Duty: Ethical Issues in Staff-Student Relations

Being a paper presented  
by

**CONFERENCE PAPER**

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that a close analysis of staff – student relations within institutions of higher learning shows that rather than both parties upholding the ethics guiding their institutions, or justifying the confidence reposed in them, some of them exhibit behaviour capable of undermining the merit system and questioning the rationale of the institutions' claim to the production and preservation of knowledge. The paper suggests that a commitment to core ethical values can help individuals in their relationship with others and ultimately help institutions to uphold values which are central to their continued relevance.

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## **Introduction**

Institutions of higher learning are near sacred establishments within which intellectual activities take place. Learning, teaching and research are at their peak in these institutions, which are credited with the pursuit and preservation of knowledge. In this discourse, the university will be used as an archetype of higher institutions. Society's expectations of the different players in the ivory tower are high but they are more so for the academic staff. As scholars, society expects academics, through their studies and research to provide ideas that would solve scientific, technical, socio-political, cultural and humanistic problems of mankind (Nwala 1994:177). Administrative staff are expected to be professional in their conduct as they ensure the smooth running of the university. It is expected that they would eschew the lackadaisical or self-serving attitude of the typical Nigerian civil servant. Society also expects students to be resolutely committed not only to the pursuit of knowledge but also to the development of character so that like their teachers, they can truly become watchdogs for the conscience of the nation.

Social relations among members of the university community can be varying and complex. They can transcend formal or official relations, which fall within the public

domain to include emotional, personal or familial relations, which are private. Disregard for the norms of social relations or non-observance of its boundaries may impede members of the university community in their bid to conform to society's expectations or discharge their duties in a manner expected in formal organizations. It is imperative that members of the university community demonstrate that they understand what constitutes 'socially acceptable' behaviour or acts within the community. They must also exhibit a willingness to pursue these acts which are adjudged to be beneficial to individuals and the entire social system; for to be ethical transcends the ability to determine right from wrong and includes the willingness and indeed the commitment to do what is right even at higher costs.

This paper examines ethical issues in staff-student relations in the university. For the purpose of this discussion, staff refers to employees of the university who could be engaged in teaching and research or administrative duties and referred to as academic/teaching staff or administrative/non-academic staff respectively. It would be so stated when an issue refers to one and not the other. Students are individuals who have enrolled in the university for a course of study leading to the award of Diploma, Certificate or Degree at either the undergraduate or post-graduate level. Ethics refers to standards that govern human behaviour based on moral duties and values emanating from the accepted principles of right or wrong in a society or group.

To achieve its objective, the paper has five main sections. The first looks at the assumptions and realities surrounding staff-student relations. The second focuses on specific ethical issues and explains how staff can abuse their office while students neglect

their duties in the course of relating to each other. The third section considers the cost of unethical practices in terms of the questioning of the merit system and the denigration of certificates. The fourth looks at the relevance of core ethical values otherwise known as the pillars of character in fostering better staff-student relations while the final section gives the conclusion and recommendations.

### **Staff-Student Relations: Assumptions and Realities**

Social relations are influenced by people's values and realities in the sense that they (i.e. values and realities) determine the meaning people give to their action and those of others. Factors such as age, class, status, gender, religion and ethnicity, which determine people's values and realities, are therefore important elements of social relations. The following basic competencies are involved in developing social relations:

- *An awareness of social norms and cultural diversity:*
- *An understanding of verbal and non-verbal cues*
- *The ability to resolve conflicts*

(<http://www.lego.com/education>)

From these competencies we can deduce a number of assumptions about staff-student relations. One of the assumptions is that staff-student relations take place under clear awareness of norms governing behaviour in the institution. It is assumed that people know what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable behaviour and they would be able to identify and interpret verbal or non-verbal cues suggestive of unethical behaviour. This assumption seems to be rooted in the proposition by Symbolic Interactionists that role taking and shared symbols facilitate the interpretation of the meanings and intentions of

others. In the views of George Herbert Mead, people tend to act in ways that are consistent both with the expected behaviour in a particular role and with that person's concept of self (Haralambos 2000: 1058).

A second assumption is that staff and students are adults capable of taking decisions. In making decisions, it is assumed that staff would think not only of their own interest but those of the students to whom they have professional or academic responsibilities. Students would also not seek their own interest at the expense of truth and fairplay.

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The assumption that staff and students are adults who would take responsibility for their actions is the third. This means that they would not seek to cover their tracks or deny acts for which they were responsible. A fourth assumption is that in relating with students staff would discharge their duties faithfully and without fear or favour. Based on this assumption, it is believed that they would not receive gratification from students or favour students in anticipation of reward from such students or their benefactors.

The fifth assumption relates to students' recognition of the primacy of academic activities during their stay in the university. With respect to this, it is assumed that students would attend classes regularly and punctually too. They would complete course work, write examinations and fulfill other conditions required for the completion of their courses. The sixth assumption is that staff and students are aware of avenues of expressing grievances or seeking redress. Each party is also aware of the other's knowledge of these avenues. It is assumed that the one who is a victim of unethical practices knows the channels of reporting and would actually use these channels.

A close examination of staff-student relations however shows that a number of these assumptions are simply what they are – suppositions. The reality is that staff-student relations are not relations of equals. The asymmetry of power makes them relations of the superior and the subordinate and the ability of the superior to elicit compliance in the subordinate is not in doubt. This unequal power relation has implications for the behaviour of staff and students as they relate to each other. When staff exhibit unethical behaviour towards students in the course of discharging their responsibilities, the choices of the latter are often quite limited. Students are often reluctant to resist or report such unwholesome behaviour because of the anticipated consequences of such an act. With this background, it is difficult to conclude that students must have consented to unethical overtures from staff. In such contexts, students cannot be said to be in control of their decision-making.

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The assumption that parties in the university community would know the code of conduct is true; but knowledge of what is right is not the same as willingness to uphold it in deed. In reality, it is easier for people to affirm their commitment to high ethical standards than to demonstrate it. Staff do not always discharge their responsibilities to their students faithfully, especially when there is no likelihood of such unfaithfulness being discovered or questioned. This raises a pertinent question with the claim of Symbolic Interactionists that people tend to act in ways that are consistent with the expected behaviour in a particular role. Why do staff who engage in unethical behaviour act contrary to expectation?

Another reality is that staff and students may be aware of channels of reporting grievances but lack of trust in the reliability of these channels, delay from long bureaucratic processes and fear of embarrassment, ridicule or criticism may stop aggrieved persons from using them. It is also a reality that students are often not committed to their academic responsibilities. These realities will be clearer through a consideration of specific ethical issues.

### **Ethical Issues**

A major ethical issue in staff-student relations is that of romantic or sexual relationship. This concerns both academic and administrative staff but would be discussed more in relation to the former. This is because members of the academic staff, in the course of their duties have more interaction with, and wider areas of control over their students. The students must of necessity relate to academic staff in their positions as teachers, supervisors or course advisers; and for the staff to utilize such interactions as opportunity for the initiation or sustenance of romantic relationships constitute an abuse of office especially as the unequal power relations means that students cannot negotiate the relationship and limits their choices. *“Such relationships raise serious questions of conflict of interest, of trust, confidence and dependency in working relations and of equal treatment of all students in teaching, learning, selection, assessment and research”* (<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/personnel/relations.htm>).

By virtue of their dominant position in staff-student relations, academic staff can prevent amorous relationships with their students. In their code of conduct on staff-student relations, Lancaster University provides some guiding principles on which the conduct of

staff ought to be based. These offer some learning points to all institutions of higher learning given that the aims of academic work are the same everywhere:

- *That staff recognize their professional and ethical responsibility to protect the interests of students, to respect the trust involved in all staff/student relationships and to accept the constraints and obligations inherent in the responsibility.*
- *That to embark on a sexual /romantic relationship with a student may involve risk and difficulties rooted in the unequal power, and hence choice of the parties concerned, as well as real problems in maintaining the boundaries of professional and personal life. Such relationships may also disrupt the teaching and learning environment for other students and colleagues.*

The institution recognizes the possibility of consensual relationships but stipulates that

- *Staff are strongly advised to discuss such relationships with an appropriate individual under assurances of complete confidentiality and with subsequent appropriate arrangement.*
- *The establishment of an academic relationship with family members or with friends or close associates who become students also raises ethical and professional issues. (<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/personnel/reasons.htm>)*

The institution prescribes that in the event of a personal relationship with a student, especially a sexual or romantic one; the member of staff should declare it to an appropriate superior or colleague or to an officer of the university designated for that purpose.

Closely related to romantic relationships is the issue of sexual harassment which involves persistent, continuous, overt or covert sexual gestures to another person. A proposition

for a romantic relationship can become sexual harassment when the initiator refuses a rebuff from the target and sexual overtures become persistent with subtle threats of possible sanction. Although sexual harassment may be covert within social relations, it affects the quality of life and learning in institutions (Bammeke 2000:53). The consequences suffered by students when they refuse sexual overtures from academic staff or seek to end existing relationships have ethical implications. The nature of staff-student relations is such that the mere thought of the possible consequences of resisting may break any form of resistance the students could have exhibited. A major consequence is the fear of intimidation. This fear, whether real or imagined can influence students' ability to learn and affect their performance in tests. It also questions the suitability of the conditions under which tests are written and the extent of fairness in assessments. It is highly unethical for staff to use their status to influence the performance of selected students adversely or otherwise to foster personal relationships or punish rebuffed or shortened ones.

The question of fairness is also raised when some students enjoy special relationships with teachers based on monetary reward or other forms of gratification. Should teachers receive gifts from students even during festivities? A major ethical issue here concerns the extent to which staff can remain objective or can be seen to be objective in discharging their responsibilities to students from whom they have received gifts. Such relationships also raise the question of equal treatment of all students under the supervision or tutelage of the concerned staff.

University staff as academic or administrative staff occupy positions of trust in their relationship with students. In the course of their duties, they have access to the records of students. Serious ethical issues can arise from staff's handling of records. There are circumstances in which students' records have been tampered with in order to give such students unmerited grades in exchange for rewards which may be in cash or kind. It is unethical to alter, destroy or cause the loss of such records in order to assist students escape punishment or enjoy underserved merit in exchange for rewards from the students or their sponsors. Such acts constitute an abuse of office and a betrayal of trust. Other unlawful acts in this category include the sale of certificates often done more by administrative staff and sometimes with the connivance of academics. The report of a smashed syndicate revealed that one John Ukpanah, a supposed graduate of Political Science from University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State and a Law student in the same university, ran a forgery syndicate with the collaboration of a professor and other academic and administrative staff of the university. The syndicate not only sold degrees and certificates and issued fake NYSC call-up letters; it also intercepted letters requesting confirmation of results and 'confirmed' forged results as genuine. The syndicate had turned over 5,000 'graduates' into the society, some of whom had secured jobs abroad. It had also yielded over N100 million for its operators over the past few years (Tell Oct. 6-14 2002:14-19).

The act of compelling students to buy handouts and reading materials where such is a contravention of the institution's regulation is clearly unethical. While it is helpful to compel students to search out reading materials especially in an environment where many university libraries have outdated texts, it is unhealthy to threaten students with sanctions

for not buying handouts. Although the threat is often subtle, it is not lost on students. When course handlers personally sell handouts or books to students and distinguish buyers by writing their names and giving them pre-determined numbers related to the purchased copy, the message is understood. The threat though unarticulated is clear.

Although the unequal power in staff-student relations often places students at the receiving end of unethical practices, students can and often initiate them. Students can seek undue advantage over others by obtaining unlawful access to examination questions, or undeserved grades which put them ahead of others through a wrong classification of their degree (students whose ability should qualify them for a 3<sup>rd</sup> class may be awarded certificates in the upper classes). They can exploit relationship with teachers or other related staff to achieve their goal, offering sexual gratification or pecuniary reward. Students often seek unlawful assistance when they have neglected their duties. These they do through absence from or lateness to lectures and failure to complete coursework. This is despite their awareness of university regulations, which stipulate that students must score 65% in attendance of course lectures, to qualify for examination in such courses. This confirms that the assumption that students would realize the primacy of academic activities in their stay in the university is not true of a large number of them.

After a neglect of their primary assignment, which often results in abysmal performance, students may seek to obtain undeserved merit by exploiting their opportunities for legitimate interaction with academic staff. They make frequent visits to the offices of concerned staff and under the guise of transacting official business, make outright request for unlawful upgrading or drop veiled suggestions to the same effect. They may also

articulate or insinuate the price attached to their request. It is not often difficult to know when staff or students conduct themselves in a manner, which raises ethical questions for as noted earlier; understanding of verbal or non-verbal cues is basic to social relations.

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### **Costs of Unethical Practices in Staff-Student Relations**

Costs of unethical practices in staff-student relations or other areas of the university can be better appreciated within the context of the reasons for the existence of the university. The objectives of the university are to discover, publish and apply knowledge to the solution of human problems. In order to realize and sustain these objectives, "*academic culture puts value on originality, commitment to truth, excellence, rationality, creativity, (and) humility... (Hagan 1994:40-41)*". Although Hagan discussed these ideals in relation to the ethic of academic freedom, they are important and relevant to this discourse because unethical practices can lead to their being compromised.

A major cost of low ethical standards in staff-student relations is that the merit system is questioned. If it is possible for some students to have unmerited grades that give them undue advantage over others or lead to the award of undeserved certificates, the merit system is compromised and threatened. The fact that only a few elements (whether students or officials) are engaged in these unethical practices notwithstanding, the entire system is jeopardized. It soon becomes public knowledge that grades are for sale in a certain university. A dire consequence of this may be the low rating of certificates and degrees from particular institutions or even the complete denigration of academic training in Nigeria generally.

The integrity of staff and their commitment to the ideals of the university is also questioned as shown in the insinuation by the media that academic staff are unscrupulous self-serving persons who would sacrifice ethical principles once the price is right. A report in Tell magazine (Oct. 6-14 2002:18) not based on any empirical study asserted that: "*Many of the lecturers in Nigeria would not bat an eyelid to compromise themselves and mortgage their conscience for money*". This confirms the African adage that one finger dipped in oil will soil the others.

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Unethical practices make it difficult for the university to perform its functions in relation to other institutions. Soyombo (1988:122) had argued that educational institutions make the manpower selection process easier for economic institutions through the grading of certificates awarded (for example university degrees are classified into first class, second class upper and lower divisions etc.). However, since corrupt practices in the educational sector create the impression that certificates and degrees are commodities for the highest bidder, it is doubtful if manpower selection is made easier. The erosion of confidence in the merit system also affects the attitude of prospective employers who are compelled to take extra measures to ascertain the veracity of the certificates presented by graduates of Nigerian institutions. This means that low ethical practices in educational institutions impose higher costs of manpower selection on economic institutions.

Another serious cost may be that the economy would be supplied with incompetent and unscrupulous people who would use unethical means to achieve desired ends. What commitment to ethical principles could be expected from lawyers who influenced their

'success' at the Bar examination or accountants whose certificates were obtained in questionable circumstances?

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### **Place of Core Ethical Values in Staff-Student Relations**

Staff and students have a moral obligation to uphold ethical principles that ensure that collective interest is not sacrificed for personal interest. For them to make ethical choices when faced with decision-making, it is important that they take cognizance of core ethical values in their relationship with one another. These core ethical values, which the Josephson Institute calls 'the six pillars of character', include trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. The African culture also appreciates these core ethical values and situates them within a person's character. The culture places a high premium on good character, which is seen as the essence of the African moral system. It has even been argued that if indeed morality is concerned essentially with right and wrong conduct, then the quality of a person's character lies at the heart of the moral life the person will lead (Gyekye 1996:65). In relation to the subject of this discussion, it means that the quality of the character of individuals whether as staff or student would determine the extent to which they would be willing to sacrifice core ethical values and thereby act contrary to expectation in their specific roles. A consideration of each of the pillars of character would illustrate their indispensability in staff-student relations.

Trustworthiness means the ability to exhibit behavioural qualities such as honesty, integrity and reliability. When students and staff possess these qualities academic or professional relationships would not be exploited for selfish purposes. Scholars will fulfill their obligation to teaching and research and respect established procedures. On

their own part, administrative staff will not use their offices for personal aggrandizement or hinder the effective running of the system. Students too will not seek to achieve undue advantage over others.

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Respect concerns the moral obligation to honour the essential worth and dignity of the individual. If students had respect for the worth of others, they would not request or suggest that others engage in undignified acts. Self-respect would also prevent them from demeaning themselves by giving their bodies in exchange for favours. In the same vein, staff, in the discharge of their academic, professional or institutional responsibilities, will not abuse students and mutual respect would be promoted.

Responsibility is another pillar of character that enables people conduct their lives with recognition that there are consequences for their actions and inaction. Being responsible makes people feel obliged to perform their duties excellently yet without losing their self-restraint. Teachers who are responsible would be committed to teaching, research, supervision and other duties assigned to them thereby facilitating learning among students. Students who possess a sense of responsibility will consider the repercussion of late registration, non-attendance of classes, absence at tests, non-completion of assignment and other actions which make them seek unlawful assistance. Responsible people generally whether as parents/guardian, teachers or other stakeholders would be mindful of the consequences of devaluing the credibility of institutions of learning and would therefore restrain from acts capable of causing this.

Fairness demands that staff employ open and impartial methods in the discharge of their responsibilities to students. Where there is fairness, rules guiding official processes would not be bent to help some students at the expense of others and justice would not only be done but would be seen to have been done at all times. Caring as a core ethical value shows concern with the welfare of others. When they uphold this value, staff and students would seek to avoid causing harm to others in the course of their duties. Staff would fulfill their in-loco-parentis role to students who would in turn hold them in high esteem. Citizenship refers to the sense of duty a person has as a member of a community. Staff and students who possess a sense of duty as members of the university community would not only know and obey the norms of the community but also strive to make the university community better. Their loyalty would be to the ideals of the university rather than to the furtherance of personal interests.

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The African culture is known to situate core ethical values in a person's character hence the need to look at the traditional social system for elements which can be integrated into staff-student relations. In African morality, what is good is that which brings about human well-being. It has been observed that an action, a habit, or a pattern of behaviour is considered good only if it promotes human and social well-being (Gyekye 1996: 58). Since unethical practices are detrimental to the well-being of individuals and groups it can be stated unequivocally that they are not good. Moral values which are considered good in African societies include trustworthiness, kindness, faithfulness and any action which shows and promotes justice, fairness, respect and other such values.

A person's commitment or ability to uphold these values depends in the African view, on the person's character which is moulded in the home right from childhood. Teachers are expected to continue the moulding of good character in the students under their tutelage through their roles as mentors. However to be good role models teachers must first possess good character. In African morality teachers who take advantage of their position to initiate sexual relationship with their students or engage in acts which would favour or victimize them would be deemed to have betrayed the trust reposed in them. They would be treated with disdain and held in low esteem. In the same vein, students who seek to utilise official relationship for the pursuance of personal interests would be seen as maladjusted individuals lacking proper home training. The shame of their action will not only be for them but also for their families. If the entire society reawakens this attitude it would be easier for the university to treat perpetrators of unethical practices as villains.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed ethical issues in staff-student relations. It has explained how staff and students often seek to utilise legitimate official relationships to further personal interests. It explained how members of staff abuse their office and students neglect their duties, yet seek to avoid the consequences through unethical practices. The costs of unethical practices in staff-student relations have also been discussed and it has been suggested that commitment to core ethical values and reawakening of African morality can foster better staff-student relations.

Unethical practices in staff-student relations need to be viewed seriously given that their consequences extend beyond individuals and affect institutions and educational systems.

An issue which questions the claim of educational institutions to the production and preservation of knowledge questions their very essence. The onus is more on academic staff to defend their institutions' claim to the preservation of knowledge although other parties have essential roles to play too. The following have emerged from the paper as important concerns in fostering healthier staff-student relations:

- Staff and students should be conversant with their institutions' standards of conduct
- Staff should discharge their duties to students faithfully and without fear or favour
- Relationship between staff and students should be one of cooperation and mutual respect
- Staff should avoid undue familiarity and romantic or sexual relationship with students for whom they have direct academic or professional responsibilities
- Students should be committed to their academic activities and respect the rights of others as they seek to protect theirs.

Low ethical standards in educational institutions portend a danger for the future, for if one of the functions of education is to change the values and attitude of people, it should be imbued with morality. Education without morality amounts to knowledge without character; such education will not be of much use because character is needed to sustain what knowledge has built. There is a need for academic staff to show people under their tutelage that ability to live by moral principles is not a myth. It is only then that students can go through the university and acquire learning and character.

In the light of the above, it is recommended that:

1. Prospective university employees, especially teachers, should be screened to ascertain their emotional and psychological stability. Confidential reports should also be obtained on their suitability for such positions of trust as are occupied by university teachers.
2. Induction should be organized for newly employed university staff in the direction of their responsibilities as academic or administrative staff. Such training should clearly set out the university's expectations of occupants of specific positions.
3. There should be on-the-job training and retraining for university staff from time to time.
4. Orientation programmes for fresh students and other opportunities should address the harm of unethical practices.
5. The university should have clearly defined general code of conduct that is well known to all staff and students. In addition to this the university must be unambiguous about teachers' conduct as well as students' conduct in specific areas such as admission, examination, supervision and personal relationship among others.
6. The university should make policy statements prohibiting improper fraternization including romantic relationship between staff and students and other unethical practices such as sexual harassment, sale of handouts etc. There should also be committees headed by people of proven integrity to investigate allegations of unethical practices.
7. Perpetrators of unethical practices should be sanctioned in measures that are sufficient to deter others.

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