

Chapter 20

A Critical Analysis: Academic Misconduct at the University of Botswana

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ABSTRACT

The University of Botswana (UB) has set high standards for student conduct aimed at maintaining its vision to be a leading center of academic excellence in Africa and the world. The institution pursues excellence by establishing high entrance requirements and strict regulations governing academic conduct. Students are expected to uphold the tenets of excellence through (among others) accountability for their performance and honesty in their pursuit of academic goals. Despite the high standards, cases of academic misconduct still occur. This chapter explores the reasons behind unsanctioned academic behavior by students. Further, the meaning of academic misconduct at the UB and how it is addressed will be discussed. This work will also interrogate the gap between institutional expectations and student behavior to find mutually beneficial ways to attain excellence.

INTRODUCTION

A large body of research from many parts of the world reveals that academic misconduct is prevalent in both secondary schools and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Chapman & Lindner, 2016; Ehrich, Howard, Mu & Bokosmaty, 2016; Fida, Tramontano, Paciello & Ghezzi, 2016). The intensity of research on academic misconduct reflects the importance of the issue in academia. A HEI is judged by the performance of its graduates in the job market, as it is perceived to be an indicator of the quality and rigor of the education imparted therein. Thus, outstanding graduates serve as ‘ambassadors’ for their Alma Mater as their knowledge and work ethic reflect the kind of training they received as students.

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UB enjoys the status of ‘the institution of choice’ for high school graduates in the country seeking HE, giving it first dip at admitting students who graduated top of their class. Given the fact that UB admits students who are supposedly academically superior to the rest, one would therefore not expect it to experience academic misconduct. Such unsanctioned behavior is still a problem at UB most likely because it has been established that even high achievers at secondary schools who ultimately progress to HEIs engage in academic misconduct (Miller, Murdock & Grotewiel, 2017). Academic misconduct continues to be a significant factor despite HEIs strong emphasis on AI and stringent academic honesty policies. According to Ehrich et al. (2016) ‘students’ attitudes toward plagiarism are typically more permissive and lenient than the policies of their tertiary institutions’ (p. 231).

The continuing incidents of academic misconduct are possible indicators of gaps in the understanding of what constitutes academic misconduct by: (a) academic staff involved in the enforcement of academic honesty policies; and (b) students. It is further argued that the seemingly undeterred infractions of these policies raise the question of whether these policies are effective in preventing academic misconduct. Moreover, it is argued that adult learners’ socioculturally constructed negative perceptions towards failure, influence academic failure avoidance strategies. The objectives of this chapter are to:

- Analyze regulatory measures taken to address academic misconduct;
- Define academic misconduct within the UB context;
- Discuss ways to control academic misconduct;
- Evaluate the influence of cultural perception of failure on academic misconduct; and
- Explain reasons for misconduct from students’ perspectives.

BACKGROUND

UB is a dual-mode public institution established in 1982 and offers both under-graduate and post-graduate programs in its eight (8) faculties. Additionally, UB delivers programs through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) modes through the Department of Distance Education (DDE). The academic misconduct cases discussed in this chapter were sampled from the DDE, where the authors are based.

As the premier institution in the country, UB maintains high academic performance standards with the intention of graduating quality products. A key part of quality assurance at UB is setting strict rules governing academic conduct for students both in continuous assessment and end of semester examinations or term papers. Thus, in the UB Revised Academic Honesty Policy for Students (RAHP), UB states that ‘academic dishonesty compromises the integrity of the University and of the qualifications its awards’ (2007, p. 2). Yu, Glanzer and Johnson (2016) also observed that AD makes it difficult for institutions to be certain that high grades are an indication that their graduates have acquired the requisite skills, or it is a result of dishonesty. Furthermore, the University expects students to hold themselves at a high moral standard of behavior (RAHP, 2007). The assumption made here is that students and the institution have a common understanding of ‘high moral standing’. This assumption is common in HEIs as they tend to assume that students at that level of learning have self-efficacy and adequate cultural capital to guide them towards acceptable behavior (Butale, 2003; Fida et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the prevalence of academic misconduct in HEIs indicates that this may not necessarily be the case as reflected in the literature drawn from various HE contexts.

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