

Beyond the degree, have integrity

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Education experts say it is high time universities incorporated lecturers on integrity in the course units to curb the rising cases of misuse of offices. FILE PHOTO

In Summary

- If a student cheated their way to a degree, then they will certainly cheat in most aspects of their lives.
- That is why higher learning institutions should equip students to be ethical actors and advocates in their future workplaces, writes ***Dorcus Murungi***.

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By Dorcus Murungi

Honesty and integrity are important traits for one to have in their academic and professional life. For instance in school, just like in workplaces, good student-teacher relationships and employee-employer relationships come from mutual respect and trust, and lead to great references and recommendations. Employers look to hire someone who has a reputation for being honest, a reason implementing honesty and integrity in education is something most institutions should adopt.

At Uganda Christian University (UCU) for instance, among the foundational courses taught is Understanding Ethics from a Christian Perspective.

This course unit is taught to all students irrespective of the courses they are pursuing. The course introduces students to basic concepts of ethics beginning with ethical foundations to applied ethics with particular emphasis on Christian moral teaching.

The objectives of the course are to make students gain an understanding of Christian ethics and apply this knowledge to contemporary issues and events. Also, the university hopes students apply this knowledge to personal ethical situations and articulate one's own understanding of God and the world.

According to Dr Anthony Kakooza, the dean of Law UCU, apart from studying the professional code of ethics, students are taught ethics from a Christian perspective so as to enable them relate ethics to their contemporary setting and examine specific ethical challenges within the Ugandan context so as to find ways of addressing the numerous ethical challenges.

“We aim to produce an all-round graduate. Apart from the qualifications, we also want our students to exhibit good working relations at their workplaces. We do not want students to get challenges with their ethics and integrity which might lead them to lose their jobs,” he asserts.

The variation

Although he does not avail statistical evidence, Dr Kakooza says UCU's emphasis on ethics and integrity has in a way broadened the market for their graduates. He observes that many employers prefer their graduates because they carry their lessons on ethics and integrity even after university.

Though UCU stresses integrity lectures, a majority of universities only end at training professional ethics and academics.

In fact Geoffrey Ochwo, a lecturer in the department of Mass Communication at Kampala International University (KIU), says their institution does not train ethics as a course on its own but their students are trained about standard disciplines for their different professions.

“Many different disciplines, institutions, and professions have standards for behaviour that suit them. These standards also help members of the discipline to coordinate their actions or activities and to establish the public's trust in the discipline. For instance, there are ethical standards that govern conduct in medicine, law, engineering, and business,” he observes. Ochwo, however, acknowledges that it is necessary for institutions to train their students not only about professional ethics but also about ethics that will govern their day-to-day working lives. He notes that observing ethics and integrity is still a big challenge in Uganda.

“It is important that students are trained about ethics and integrity at every level of their education. I believe it is not enough to learn about these aspects just once in a semester but continuously because a lack of integrity affects all sectors in the country,” he observes.

Integration

Experts say for these courses to be seen as relevant, they should be integrated in the standard

ones of every course of study. As Dr Kakooza says, at UCU, continuous training on ethics and integrity is done in addition to teaching ethics in a Christian perspective. He explains that each lecturer is obliged to teach about the moral obligation of every topic they cover so as to enhance the student's ethics and integrity.

"If we are teaching students about Land Law for instance, we also tell them about their moral obligations. This in a way is supposed to guide students to always observe ethics during practice," he says.

He adds that the spiraling cases of corruption in most institutions in the country today could reduce if only students are cautioned about integrity at almost each level of education.

Emphasis needed

John Baptist Imokola, a lecturer in the department of Mass Communication at Makerere University, says though most universities are still handling ethics and integrity lightly, it is something that must be emphasised because if someone has integrity, they are honest and firm in their moral principles.

"Even if you have good grades and every company is willing to take you on, you might not keep that job if you lack ethics and integrity. With ethics and integrity comes dependability, honesty, loyalty and good judgment which are vital in making an employee stand out in this competitive job world," he says.

Dr Kakooza says integrity in the workplace is important because it fosters a positive workplace culture. He says when workers have integrity, there is open communication, good decision-making and a strong moral compass guiding all decisions and actions.

"Whereas, irresponsible behaviour and distrust can make a work environment uncomfortable and tense, with ethics and integrity, you can never go wrong," he says.

To him, ethics and integrity are two pillars that are beneficial to a professional.

Corruption on rise

In a clear case of lack of integrity at places of work, the Inspector General of Government (IGG), in January named government institutions and districts most accused of corruption in the latest survey by the ombudsman. The list was based on complaints sent to the Ombudsman by members of the public and not conclusive investigations by the IGG. District administrations topped the complaints list on corruption with 328 cases translating into 21 per cent of the registered grievances. Kampala was named the district with most corruption accusations with 334 complaints (21.4 per cent).