



## Quality Assurance Mechanisms as Tools to Achieve the Continental Education Strategy for Africa

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### Abstract

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*Since its launch in 2016, the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) has witnessed great successes, with African educational stakeholders leveraging on its 13 clusters to ensure the transformation of the continent's education in furtherance of the achievements of the AU Agenda 2063. Organisations such as the Association of African Universities, the International Network for Higher Education in Africa, and the European Union have held conferences to create awareness and find ways to achieve the aspirations of the CESA. Their initiatives have not been without challenges, especially in a key fundamental quality assurance area – academic corruption. This desk review examines the Continental Education Strategy for Africa from a quality assurance lens by establishing the hindrances that academic corruption poses or will pose to the achievement of the strategy within the Africa Higher Education Space (AHES). The study further argues that achieving the desire to use African human resources to achieve the continent's educational aspirations will entail measures that will minimise all forms of academically dishonest practices within the AHES, especially amongst students, since inappropriate teaching methods lead to tendencies of cheating. In curbing this, the review argues for an African-born educational model that assures quality and can reduce academic dishonesty towards the achievement of the CESA.*

**Keywords:** *Continental Education Strategy for Africa, Agenda 2063, Quality Assurance, Africa Higher Education, Academic Dishonesty*

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## Introduction

One of the key conclusions of the 2014 World Economic Forum held from January 22 to 25 in Davos, Switzerland, was the need for global leaders to address inequities in the socio-economic arrangements of national, regional, and global communities, especially through education and partnerships (Okebukola, 2014). African leaders' vision of integration, peace, prosperity, and peerage in the global economy is predicated on Africa's human resource capital development. Education is important to achieve the vision of developing quality human capital. Higher education will aid Africa in contributing to the world knowledge economy (Okebukola, 2015).

Previously, the African continent relied on development frameworks that were not continent-specific to achieve the developments for its higher education. Africa's higher education seems to be witnessing a shift towards a trusted framework that will drive the developmental aspirations of the continent (Awaah, 2019a). This assertion is born from the emergence of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25), which is within the broader framework of the African Union's Agenda 2063. Six years after its birth, CESA has witnessed tremendous acceptance by academic stakeholders within the continent, with many adopting and implementing strategies that reflect the aspirations of the CESA.

Through partnerships with member states and key stakeholders, the African Union developed and adopted the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25) in line with the African Union 2063 Agenda and the Common African Position on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (Association of African Universities, 2020). To ensure the achievement of the strategy to provide each education stakeholder with the opportunity to make their best contribution to education and training in Africa, the Association of African Universities (AAU) has been appointed as the body coordinating the implementation of The Higher Education Cluster of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa.

To achieve the broad objectives of harnessing the efforts of all education stakeholders in a bid to achieve the Continental Education

Strategy for Africa (CESA), different clusters were created, representing the different educational group levels on the continent. Consequently, in June 2016, the higher education cluster was created in Addis Ababa at the premises of the Africa Union Commission (AUC) to support the realisation of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa. The success of the strategy is contingent on certain guiding principles. Firstly, knowledge societies called for by Agenda 2063 driven by skilled human capital; holistic, inclusive and equitable education with good conditions for lifelong learning as the sine qua non for sustainable development; good governance, leadership, and accountability in education management; harmonized education and training systems essential for the realisation of intra-Africa mobility and academic integration through regional cooperation; quality and relevant education, training and research necessary for scientific and technological innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship as well as a healthy mind in a healthy body – referring to physically and socio-psychologically – fit and well-fed learners (AUC, n.d.).

Within the remits of these guiding principles, the strategy sets for itself the objectives of revitalising teaching to ensure quality and relevance at all levels of education; building, rehabilitating, and preserving educational infrastructure, as well as developing policies that ensure a permanent, healthy and conducive learning environment in all sub-sectors and for all, further expanding access to quality education. Further objectives are harnessing the capacity of ICT to improve access, quality, and management of education and training systems; ensuring the acquisition of requisite knowledge and skills as well as improved completion rates at all levels and groups through harmonisation processes across all levels for national and regional integration; accelerating processes leading to gender parity and equity and launching comprehensive and effective literacy programs across the continent to eradicate the scourge of illiteracy (AUC).

This paper examines how a fundamental principle of quality assurance (academic integrity) may be overcome to achieve quality and relevant education as set out in the objectives of the CESA.

## **Academic Dishonesty and the Bad Apple Theory**

Academic corruption has received attention in the higher education literature within the African region in the past few years. Awaa and Abdulai (2020) observed that the practice is related to university administrators, students, lecturers, etc. They attribute its occurrence in the African region to greed, competition for promotions, faculty demands, and personal ambitions. These occurrences of academic corruption can thwart the successful implementation of CESA by undermining good governance, leadership, and accountability in education management.

According to Mattar (2021), combating academic corruption should cover higher education governance, the regulation of higher education, admissions and recruitment, assessment, and corruption in credentials. From Mattar's (2021) conclusions, one can deduce that academic corruption affects the quality of education and the image of educational institutions, preventing holistic, inclusive, and equitable education needed for lifelong learning and sustainable development. Similarly, the objective of CESA to ensure the acquisition of requisite knowledge and skills and improve completion rates at all levels and groups through harmonisation processes across all levels for national and regional integration will be difficult to achieve with academically dishonest practices. Studies show that researchers working on corruption in higher education might face challenges, especially if affiliated with an educational institution (Denisova-Schmidt, 2020).

Many theories have been propounded to help understand academic corruption. This study finds the bad apple theory appropriate. The Bad Apple Theory focus on the individual as the cause of corruption globally. The theory suggests that corruption exists because we have people with immoral traits called 'bad apples' (Graaf, 2007). Graaf (2007) believes that there is a causal link between bad character to corrupt conduct, and also, the underlying cause of corruption is found in poor human character and a propensity for criminal activity. The theory argues that the causes of corruption are linked with human weaknesses like greed. The theory also postulates that when the concentration is on the defective characters of an officeholder, morality then begins to regulate behaviour.

Per the postulations of the theory, people engage in academic corruption because they have defective behaviours that influence their actions. This theory is important for this paper because it helps explain the academically dishonest practices within the African region that undermine or may undermine the achievement of the various objectives of CESA.

## **Methodology**

This study is a desk review. The academic corruption literature was interrogated primarily as a descriptive study to provide baseline information on how academic corruption can impact the achievement of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa. The study specifically reviewed the literature on teaching and learning practices that are unethical and can or are impeding the achievement of the CESA. Ethical practices have also been reviewed and reported regarding teaching and learning that enhance or will enhance the CESA. A full bibliography of information sources reviewed is given in the references section.

## **Quality Assurance in Africa's Higher Education**

Quality assurance has played a major role in developing and implementing qualification frameworks needed to promote academic mobility (Shabani, [2013](#)). A quality culture is not an event involving an accreditation audit but a continuously integrated system involving core academic areas and accepted by all concerned in the programme (Moodley, [2019](#)). Implementing a good quality culture can help CESA build, rehabilitate, preserve education infrastructure, and develop policies that ensure a permanent, healthy, and conducive learning environment in all sub-sectors and expand access to quality education (AUC, n.d.)

Quality assurance is an important strategic issue in tertiary education systems across the globe for shaping and constant improvement of educational quality and constitutes one of the most significant tasks of contemporary higher education (Ulewicz, [2017](#)). This results in many education institutions allocating resources for assessment by external

quality assurance bodies to enhance student's educational experiences (Tezcan-Unal, Winston & Qualter 2018).

According to Seyfried & Pohlenz (2018), quality assurance is a means to develop a quality culture that enhances the willingness of academic staff to make use of evidence to innovate their teaching and their attitudes towards higher education as a response to changes in the environment and changing target audiences. In support of this position, Ramadhani and Sudarma (2017) assert that the effect of every element of a quality control system is leadership responsibilities for quality on audit, relevant ethical requirements, acceptance and continuance of client relationships, and certain engagements, assignment of engagement teams and engagement performance. This argument is evidential since Quality Assurance (QA) directly affects students' perceived service quality on students' satisfaction and motivation and indirectly affects students' loyalty (Subrahmanyam, 2017).

With globalisation and the upsurge of the knowledge economy, there has been a worldwide increase in demand for higher education, resulting in the proliferation of private higher education institutions (PHEIs) (Stander and Herman, 2017). Subsequently, quality assurance and the management of the QA processes of these institutions have become increasingly important. Stander and Herman (2017) argues that QA of Private Higher Education Institutions in South Africa is a contested area. On the one hand, it aims at protecting the public from unscrupulous providers. On the other, the complexity of the Quality Assurance legislative framework has become a major concern to private providers. The study identified physical and financial resources, capacity development, such as staff roles and responsibilities, academic leadership and development and research, and programme design as challenges impeding the implementation of quality assurance in Private Higher education institutions. These challenges are, by implication, limiting the furtherance of CESA's objectives.

In a related study, Shabani, Okebukola & Oyewole (2014) attributed the challenges of quality assurance on the continent to the limited human capacity of quality assurance agencies, ineffectiveness in

implementing harmonisation strategies and the lack of tools needed to compare qualifications. While the works of these authors establish the underpinning challenges related to quality assurance within the AHES, there is a need to turn our lenses to how quality assurance, especially academic honesty, can enhance the achievements of the continental education strategy for Africa. Many studies within the Africa region have established that students within the region find some concepts difficult to study (see Awaah, Arkorful, Foli, Darteh, & Yeboah, 2021; Awaah, Okebukola, Ebisin, Agbanimu, Peter, Ajayi, ... & Ademola, 2020; and Awaah, Okebukola, Alfa, Anagba, Yeboah & Arkorful, 2021). These difficulties have been ascribed to a lack of teacher confidence, students' lack of previous background in studying the subject, wide syllabi, texts too difficult to follow and non-literate parental backgrounds.

Students' difficulties in understanding are usually linked to quality culture since inappropriate teaching methods undermine student understanding. This usually will lead to academic dishonesty within the African region as students may resort to unethical means to ensure success in their exams. Likewise, teachers who lack the requisite qualifications may resort to less-than-ideal teaching methods that would not produce the quality results expected, hence the tendency to undermine efforts to effectively achieve CESA's objectives.

These tendencies, especially the lack of student–environment fit teaching models, call for a teaching model that reflects the cultural environment of African students within the nook and cranny of the continent. Within the remits of this thinking, the *culturo techno contextual method*, which has proven effective for teaching within the African region (Agbanimu, 2020, Peter, 2020, Awaah, 2020), is proffered to aid teaching and learning in a bid to ensure quality and also help in the achievement of the CESA.

## **Academic Dishonesty and Achievement of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa**

CESA seem to have gained publicity and has seen growing evidence in Africa's higher education, with organisations like the Association of African Universities working in key thematic areas of the strategy to ensure its success (Awaah, [2019b](#)). Much as evidence exists of the gains made by these organisations, it is important to establish that Africa's human resources need more empowerment to achieve the strategy. However, the human resources in Africa's higher education expected to drive the change agenda seem to be the very threat to the agenda, with recent media reports suggesting that most African academics are involved in practices that can be described as dishonest and can undermine the very strategy that they are expected to work at achieving (Awaah, [2019b](#)).

Corruption is a great threat to the integrity of education and research. It undermines the trust placed in the educational process, devalues academic qualifications, and forces research outcomes to be questioned. All stakeholders interested in quality and standards carry tacit responsibility for identifying, addressing and helping to eradicate corrupt practices. However, it is difficult for individuals involved in QA activities to "swim against the tide" either within or externally to an institution. Strong commitment and leadership on integrity are essential prerequisites for addressing corruption and malpractice within an institution (Glendinning, Orim & King, [2019](#)). The key complementary component in supporting the integrity and upholding quality and standards comes from external scrutiny, both at the institutional level and for the whole HE sector, regionally or nationally. In many educational systems, this monitoring is provided by at least one designated accreditation or quality assurance body, usually with overarching oversight from a government department or committee (Glendinning et al., [2019](#)).

In line with prevalent corrupt academic practices, many sectors of Africa's higher education are compromised. For instance, McCrostie ([2018](#)) reports that the number of questionable conferences has increased worldwide. Questionable conference organisers are companies that aim to profit as much as possible from the event by



preying on researchers' need to present research findings. They fail to perform any peer review and deceive researchers into maximising profits.

However, efforts to reduce these incidents may be bearing fruit. Awaah (2019c) found that many female students (75.6%) would report sexual advances made by lecturers for improved grades, while 20.5% will not. The remaining 3.9% are undecided, depending on different factors. The respondents proffered various reasons for their willingness to report these acts. Respondents who would report cited the acts being against their human rights; the acts not being right; the acts being unethical, and an abuse of authority informed their decision to report in such a scenario. Respondents who will not report cited not knowing who to report to, fear of victimisation, and lack of evidence of the sexual advances.

### **The Nexus between Academic Integrity and Attainments of the CESA**

The existence of academic dishonesty is a matter of concern for higher education institutions everywhere (Finchilescu & Cooper, 2018). Academic integrity plays a pivotal role in every reform intended to enhance the educational sector. The achievement of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa will be compromised if there are pockets of academically dishonest practices reported within the African region.

Teachers are key players in educational improvement. Any benefits that accrue to students due to educational policies require the enabling action of teachers (Hopkins & Stern, 1996). This observation is not without implications for the Continental Education Strategy for Africa. In the context of this paper, a key element of quality teachers is exemplified by those circumspect of their roles as models to students and, as such, keeping in focus the integrity required in their line of duty.

In this regard, academically corrupt teachers are teachers with evidence of plagiarism, sex for marks, lateness to lectures, leaking examination questions, and absenteeism from lectures. While these practices are not limited to Africa, the achievement of CESA's objectives are largely hinged on practices that reflect the needs and aspirations of the

continent, thus the need for African teachers to desist from these practices. While the academic corruption literature catalogues several good practices worthy of reporting, there is ample evidence of teachers engaging in such activities as sex for grades, plagiarism and related ill practices ( See, Awaah 2019c, Awaah & Abdulai, 2020) that are directly contrarily to the aspirations of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa.

For instance, In Kenya, corruption is one of the social problems that permeate all economic sectors, including education. There is alleged corruption in the recruitment, promotion, transfer and deployment of teachers. In schools, both primary and secondary, there are instances of corruption in the recruitment of students in form one (especially in the prestigious national secondary schools), supply of materials to the schools, and national examinations. At the higher education level, the same repeats itself in the form of tribalism and ethnicity in employment, promotion and recruitment of students (Taaliu, 2017). Musau and Boibanda (2017) further report that academic dishonesty is prevalent in Kenya, with the majority of those involved believing that their classmates are also into the practice. They report that the leading forms of academic dishonesty include both traditional analogue and modern digital methods. This may lead to the production of unskilled human capital, further hindering CESA's implementation.

While the Kenyan situation is not relative to teachers alone, other studies have suggested academically dishonest practices amongst African teachers that may undermine the strategies placed to ensure the achievements of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa. Nigeria, for instance, is among several developing countries going further than many developed countries in specifically addressing academic corruption in law, and many African universities are seeking to copy its commitment not to only punish but to name and shame offenders. When Distinguished Professor Peter Okebukola was appointed executive secretary of the National Universities Commission in Nigeria in 2001, one of the first things he decided to do was move against satellite campuses that were selling certificates, a major source of academic fraud O'Malley, 2018).

O'Malley (2018) further reports that a national survey of academic corruption in Nigeria showed the breadth of the ongoing challenge more than ten years later. In a higher education system serving 160 universities and 1.8 million students, forms of corruption reported included cheating during exams; marks given for favours, especially financial and sexual; hacking of institutional IT systems to alter students' academic records; plagiarism on assignments, term papers and theses; absenteeism of students and lecturers from classes; failure to cover the syllabi before the end of the semester and the conduct of the examination; outsourcing of theses, assignments and projects; publishing in fake journals; and sabotaging others in their efforts to complete their work, for example by cutting pages out of library books or willfully disrupting the experiments of others.

The evidence from Nigeria and Kenya is problematic not only for these countries' academic environs but also for entire Africa since there are established empirical studies pointing to the relationships between academic corruption and development. For instance, in a study by Orosz, Tóth-Király, Bóthe, Paskuj, Berkics, Fülöp & Roland-Lévy (2018) using data from 40 countries, a strong relationship between self-reported academic cheating on exams and the country level of the corruption perception index was found.

### **Successful Quality Assurance Regimes within the African Region worth Benchmarking for the Achievement of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa**

The quality culture does not occur by chance. Deliberate efforts are made to ensure good quality cultures within institutions of higher learning to ensure desired outcomes. These efforts geared at achieving institutional outcomes indirectly help the overall achievements of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa. A number of these have been catalogued for institutional benchmarks.

## Ashesi University - Honour Code

Honour code. This has to do with individuals making personal pledges to abide by rules and regulations governing the conduct of examinations and being personally responsible for flouting those rules. As a best practice, higher education institutions should develop and implement honour codes to serve as a check on the academic activities of both students and officials. This can help lessen academic corruption by lauding students who have diligently observed the rules and regulations laid down in the codes (Awaah & Abdulai, 2020).

In keeping to the tenets of honour codes, it is envisaged that corrupt educational practices within the African region will be minimal and hasten the achievement of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa. The instance of Ashesi University is worth reporting;

*"In keeping with Ashesi's mission to educate a new generation of ethical leaders, the faculty and executives of Ashesi University approved in November 2007 a proposal to formally invite selected classes at Ashesi to adopt an Honour Code for examinations at the university".*

Since its inception, the university has witnessed the training of responsible and ethical students whose characters and actions reflect the university's aspirations. This has been noted as a worthy initiative that has drastically curtailed the incidence of academic dishonesty in the university. Asheshi's model is not only a benchmark in Ghana but is worth replicable in other African regions to ensure the implementation of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa in a manner that will make Africa's education transparent trustworthy, and globally competitive.

In support of the role of the honour code to achieve the tenets of CESA, Christopher Zanu, Judicial and Electoral Chairperson (JEC), envisaged this role earlier than today when he reported that,

*"If Ashesi is to raise leaders to transform Africa, then I believe this Social Honour code if imbibed and practised, is the moral foundation on which Africa will be transformed."*

The honour code instituted by the Ashesi University contradicts the the Bad Apple Theory and as such brings about morally uprights studentns rather than academically corrupt persons. The theory emphasis on the individual as the basis of corruption. According to Graaf,( 2007) the underpinning principle of the theory is that, corruption exists because we have people with immoral traits called 'bad apples'. He asserts that, there is a link between bad character to corrupt conduct; the underlying cause of corruption is found in poor human character and a propensity for criminal activity.

### **Laweh Open University College - Cameras and Academic Writing from First Year**

Introducing scholarly writing at the commencement of university education. Introducing scholarly writing helps curb the fraud related to academic writing, such as plagiarism. When students are introduced to scholarly writing at an early age, they 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's observations at the university.

Recognising that the convenience of cheating in examinations is usually fueled by the sitting proximity of students to each other, the university ensures students are sparsely distributed to ensure they are unable to communicate with each other.

The third quality assurance model adopted by the university is the installation of cameras in the examination rooms to deter students from cheating. This measure is done in compliment to physical invigilation.

### **University of Professional Studies- Accra**

The University of Professional Studies – Accra has instituted the conference marking, where all lectures mark scripts at a central point to avoid the possibility of students compromising lecturers with money and sex for grades (usually related to lecturers taking scripts home or to the offices to mark).

Further, the university has adopted the shuffling of questions for the same students in that, while students may be writing the same paper,

their questions may not be the same, and in the instance that the questions are the same, the question numbers will differ. This measure ensures the student cannot assist each other even when they can communicate in examinations since their questions or question numbers are not the same.

The university has also adopted placing students of two or three courses in the same exam room simultaneously for examinations. With this measure, students cannot help each other even if they can communicate since their subject areas are different.

The steps put in place by the University of professional studies Accra are pointers that can be adopted to overcome some of the academically corrupt practice reported by O'Malley (2018) in the Nigerian educational space. He reports that a national survey of academic corruption in Nigeria showed the breadth of the ongoing challenge including cheating during exams; marks given for favours, especially financial and sexual.

### **Notes for Stakeholders**

On the shoulders of subjects or concepts taught from foreign perspectives and books imported from other regions, many African students cannot grasp the contents of these books leading to academic corruption that compromises the quality assurance measures in the AHES. This trend threatens the continent's drive to achieve CESA. As a matter of policy, the AU and the AAU should ensure Afrocentric teaching regimes with cultural and African contexts in the teaching and learning within African universities. Home developed models and theories like the Culturo-Techno-Contextual Approach will go a long way to ensure students' understanding, minimising the "dir" relative to academic corruption in AHES, which undermines quality and the achievement of CESA's objectives.

Quality assurance agencies have a responsibility to scrutinise the activities of higher education institutions to ensure that quality is achieved and maintained.

## **Implications for Comparative Educational Reforms and Strategies**

The lessons of academic corruption and how it negatively impacts the Continental Education Strategy for Africa are worth noting for comparative purposes. Although other educational policies such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have a larger catchment area beyond Africa, the achievement of its goal 4 may benefit from lessons learned in this study. While the study largely drew literature from the African educational systems, the issue of academic dishonesty is universal and tends to affect other educational aspirations and strategies in different parts of the world. Crafters of educational policies within the nook and cranny of the world may draw from the inferences of our study to ensure effective achievements of their educational policies, whether locally, regionally or globally.

## **Conclusion**

This desk study reviewed the Continental Education Strategy for Africa from a quality assurance perspective. Specifically, the study considered academically corrupt practices that have impeded or may impede the achievement of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa. It ends by scanning the African region and reporting on quality assurance measures in selected institutions that can be replicated to ensure smooth achievements of the aspirations of CESA. The paper suggests the adoption of honour codes, CCTV cameras, conference marking, shuffling of questions for the same students, and placing students of two or three courses in the same exam room simultaneously for examinations.

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