ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH AND PUBLISHING.

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Abstract

Academic integrity is fundamental for credible research and publishing, yet global academic systems face a plethora of rising challenges such as, plagiarism, falsification, predatory publishing, and systemic embedded pressure, christened "publish or perish." These challenges undermine the pursuit of credibility and excellence in research, and greatly erode public trust in higher education. This paper critically examines patterns of misconduct, the structural drivers that perpetuate them, and their disproportionate impact on academic excellence and research. Drawing on literatures and policy frameworks, the paper proposes pathways for strengthening integrity among academics and students, reforming institutional governance, improving publishing standards, and building capacity in resource-constrained contexts. The paper concludes that integrity is the cornerstone of excellence and calls for reforms that shift academic cultures toward quality-driven, context-sensitive, and equitable practices.

Keywords: Academic Integrity, Research Excellence, Publishing Ethics, Questionable Research Practices, Research Misconduct.

Introduction

One of the goals of higher education, is character building, alongside teaching and learning and research. Achieving these, require academic integrity and excellence. This paper examines the global challenge of enforcing consistent global standards. Why academic integrity? It is essential

in emphasizing the principles of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage in academic work. (International Center for Academic Integrity, 2014). In research and publishing, it focuses on accurate data reporting, proper citation, originality, and ethical authorship practices (Bretag, 2016). Whereas, research excellence, lay emphasisis on innovation, impact, and quality of scholarly outputs (Hicks et al., 2015). Though, these concepts have distinct characteristics, they are interdependent in nature. Suffice it to state that, no research can be considered excellent, if it is built on unethical or dishonest practices.

Conceptual Clarification

Academic Integrity: It is a concept that emphasizesthe principles of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage in academic work. (International Center for Academic Integrity, 2014). In research and publishing, it focuses on accurate data reporting, proper citation, originality, and ethical authorship practices (Bretag, 2016).

Research Excellence: Is conceptually characterized with emphasis on innovation, impact, and quality of scholarly outputs (Hicks et al., 2015). Though, academic integrity and research excellence in some situations, are intertwined, they have distinct features, but interdependent in nature. Suffice it to state that, no research can be considered excellent, if it is built on unethical or dishonest practices, and such will be said to lack academic integrity. Thus, research excellence is often measured through systems output, with emphasis on the quality of publications, publication counts, citations, impact and contribution to knowledge, and international visibility (Hicks et al., 2015). Moosa (2018), however, opined that, research excellence shouldpromote quality over quantity-based practices, in order to checkmate ethical compromises and maintain excellence and integrity in academics.

Publishing Ethics: The term publishing ethics connotes established standard of ethical conduct, to ensure the integrity, quality and validity of published research works. It is essential to promote honesty and transparency, ethical approval and fair evaluation, as well as preventing plagiarism and data fabrication. Principles of publishing ethics, are; integrity-which ensures honesty and proven trustworthiness, honesty and accountability-which ensures accuracy for publications decisions, transparency- to support ethical approval for research, fairness-which encourages that editors evaluate manuscript without bias and favour in research works, but review based on intellectual content. Moreso, it ensures compliance with regulations, especially as it concerns copyright and libel, reliability, accuracy of research, builds public trust in the research findings, and to promote collaboration and research integrity.

Questionable Research Practices (QRPs): Connotes a range of non-transparent research activities that hampers the accuracy of research findings. For example, improper referencing, selective reporting, inadequate recording of the research process, collecting more data after seeing

the results, which is known as "HARK"- Hypothesizing, After the Results are Known", or presenting unexpected findings or reporting empirically unsupported hypothesis.

Research Misconduct: The term academic or research misconduct, includes, but not limited to plagiarism, falsification, fabrication, duplicate submission, and unethical authorship (Steneck, 2006). Some fraudulent researchers lift ideas of others authors and support their findings, without accurate citations. This unethical practice known as plagiarism remains a common misconduct among some emerging peer researchers, and it is linked to pressures to publish and inadequate training (Bretag, 2016). Misconduct is fabrication and falsification of data. Fang, et.al, (2012), opined that, these directly undermine knowledge reliability and most times, lead to long-term reputational damage. Academic misconduct undermines, academic integrity and excellence, and it's becoming a global issue. Literatures are a washed with high profile cases of retractions, as a result of fabrication and falsification of data. As reported by the (Retraction Watch, 2021), there is an observed exponential growth in retracted publications, reflecting persistent misconduct and improved detection. It also reported high-profile cases in biomedical sciences,which highlights the impact of image manipulation and fabricated data (Oransky & Marcus, 2016). Brainard (2018), reported that even prestigious journals such as *Nature* and *Science* have had issues of retractions, implying that, academic misconduct is both a global and multi-disciplinary issue.

The Interdependence of Integrity and Excellence

The drive for excellence without integrity results in flawed scholarship that undermines knowledge production. Integrity is the foundation that supports research outputs in terms of credibility and impact. As institutions keep pushing for higher rankings and outputs, the temptation to compromise integrity increases, which threatens the very notion of excellence (Moosa, 2018).

Theoretical background

Positive virtue and right ethical behavior, emphasizes honesty and accountability as character traits central to researchers (Macfarlane, Zhang, & Pun, 2014). Deontological ethics, that integrity in academics should not be compromised,positions irrespective of outcomes, while consequentiality perspectives stresses the negative impact of misconduct on credibility and public trust (Resnik, 2020). Together, these theories underscore integrity as both a moral obligation and a professional necessity in academics and in research.

Literature Review

Academic integrity and research excellence are gradually eroding, not just in the Global South, but a global concern. It is even getting worse with the emerging trend of AI. Some scholars, rely so much on AI, that their creative abilities are rapidly on the decline. This is becoming another global issue of concern for academic integrity and research excellence. Fang, Steen, & Casadevall

(2012) and Retraction Watch (2021), submitted that, academic misconduct is becoming a global concern, and high-profile cases of data fabrication, plagiarism, and unethical authorship have led to retractions even in top-ranked journals. This they opined is mostly caused by systemic pressure to "publish or perish". A challenge that is seemingly favourable to predatory publishers, who exploit the pressures to publish, especially in contexts where career progression is tied to the number of publicationsand detrimental to the system, because integrity culture is compromised (Shen & Björk, 2015). These issues manifest in different shapes across global contexts. In the Global South, limited access to training, lack of support for research, poor financing, weak institutional support, and over dependence on international publishing systems make the problem more complex (Owusu-Nimo & Boshoff, 2017).

Academic Misconduct

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Predatory Publishing

Predatory journals exploit the systemic pressure of publish or perish and the publications counts based career growth or promotion to financially extort authors, but fail to provide rigorous peer review. Estimates suggest tens of thousands of articles are published annually in such outlets (Crawford, 2014), regrettably, scholars in the Global South are especially, vulnerable due to financial constraints, lack of awareness and training (Xia et al., 2015)

Factors Challenging Academic Integrity and Excellence

The coexistence of integrity standards and output-driven evaluation systems sometimes creates tension, because, scholars face competitive pressures to publish frequently, described as the

"publish-or-perish paradox" (Fanelli, 2010).In the Global South, where resources are limited, this pressure intensifies and, often undermine ethical conduct rather than reinforcing it.In the Global South, the challenges of academic integrity and excellence include, but not limited to lack of funding and sponsorship for research, limited training, weak institutional policies, and over-reliance on Northern publishing systems, through promotion systems which often emphasizes international journal publications and visibility and seemingly preference for quantity over quality.These systemic inequities heighten vulnerability to academic misconduct.

Publish-or-Perish Culture: Performance-driven evaluation systems reward volume or number of publications over quality of publication. This has been linked to increased cases of misconduct in academics and research, such that undermines integrity and excellence.

Weak Institutional Policies : It is commonly observed that, many higher institutions adopt policies superficially but fail to enforce them consistently Sanctions are often uneven, with junior staff punished more harshly than senior academics (Resnik & Shamoo, 2017; Altbach, 2015). This undermines deterrence and erodes trust in the system, because, the junior staff are supposed to mirrow the senior staff members, but in situations, where their academic misconducts are pampered and same misconduct amongst the junior staff is severely condemned, it seriously undermines integrity and excellence.

Global South Dependence on Northern Publishers: High APCs exclude many Global South scholars from reputable outlets (Sarpong, 2021). Predatory journals exploit this gap (Shen & Björk, 2015). Language barriers and inequitable access reinforce dependence on Northern systems (Owusu-Nimo & Boshoff, 2017) These challenges create a "crisis of trust" in the academia, while retractions and predatory publishing not just reduces the credibility of research outputs, but also undermine their role in societal progress.

Lack of Funding and Sponsorship for Research: Most research carried out down here in the global South, is solely sponsored and financed by the researcher, who is struggle to survive in a depressed economy and faced with other equally challenging financial needs. This situation, forces a lot of researchers to cut corners as a way of surviving the biting financial demands of research. Most research institutes, lack adequate funding, thereby undermining the hope of any form of support for a researcher. This is not just challenging, but quite disheartening.

Publications- Driven-Promotion Culture: Some institutions promotion and job progression are tied to a specified number of publications. This practice, though, not unethical, emphasizes quantity over quality. In pursuit of growth and promotion on the job, so many persons indulge in academic misconduct, such that undermines academic integrity and excellence.

Pathways toward Academic Integrity and Research Excellence

For the academics, there are ethical practices, that when duly enthroned, promise to promote the culture of academic integrity and research excellence. Such as, training, mentorship, and responsible authorship practices, which are vital for maintaining academic integrity and research excellence (Steneck, 2006; Anderson et al., 2007).

For the students, introducing academic writing and plagiarism education early, in course of teaching will drastically reduce the incidences of academic misconduct among students, who engages in the misconduct out of ignorance.

For the institutions, strong governance, independent ethics committees, and consistent enforcement of punishment for offenders of academic misconduct will lower the rate of misconduct. Investment in plagiarism detection promises to also reduce the rate of misconduct in the Global South Universities (Banda, 2018).

For the publishers, transparent peer review, robust retraction systems, and open peer review will increase accountability (Ross-Hellauer, 2017).

For the Global South, equitable partnerships, open access initiatives, and regional networking will strengthen integrity (Sarpong, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Moreso, collective approaches such as the African Research Integrity Network, is a promising approach, at reducing academic misconduct (Banda, 2018).

Conclusion

Integrity and excellence are the basis of credible research, and can be strengthened, through policies that emphasize quality over quantity, and encourage Universities and publishers to embed ethics in daily academic practices. Moreso, systemic re-evaluation, with focus on quality over quantity. Adequate funding for research, healthy collaborations and reward for credibility, originality and impact. Since studies abound that most academic misconduct stems from structural pressures, such as, publish-or-perish,weak governance, and inequitable systems, and not just individual failures, if institutions, formulate tailored reforms that will address resource constraints, encourage equality over quantity and reduce overdependence on the Global North for research validation and visibility, only then, can academic integrity and research excellence be truly aligned in academics. Only such integrity and excellent culture, will be capable of reducing academic misconduct globally.

Suggestions:

1. Shifting to Quality-Focused Evaluation: Universities and funders should emphasize quality and relevance over raw counts, and as well, integrate integrity culture into curricula and staff development programmes. Embedding a culture of ethics and integrity should become a part of academic identity.

2. Role modelling, mentorship, consistent sanctions, and transparent reporting should be encouraged, because such, foster cultures of honesty.

3. The Governmentt should encourage integrity frameworks, funding of research and training, not just as a policy, but should ensure that such policy is fully implemented, and also call for sponsorship for research.

4. Enhancing Global Collaboration, this will encourage partnerships and research collaboration between the Global North and South, for exchange of ideas, experience and capacity building,

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