Chapter V
Creating a Firewall Against Unethical Behaviours in Open and Distance Education Practice

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ABSTRACT

The current process of democratizing education has inevitably led to the explosive demands by the citizens of the different countries for unrestricted admission into the conventional tertiary institutions as full time students. Unfortunately, the universities have no absorptive capacity to meet the demands due to many perennial factors. In order to meet these enormous requirements, it therefore becomes paramount for universities to restructure, re-engineer and reform. The paradigm shift therefore necessitates the repositioning of tertiary institutions in order to effect the change from "selective learning" to "lifelong learning" and from what "we offer" to what "you need" and therefore, simultaneously develop the skills of "learning to learn," especially in their clients. Where many distance learning institutions (DLIs) have become relevant in the current dispensation is in their ability to create wider accessibility to education through the open, distance and flexible operation, which allows for learning and earning going pari-passu in meeting the needs and aspirations of their heterogeneous clientele. Paradoxically, however, the majority of the world population who are ignorant of the operation and value of distance education generally, view its products as well as its programmes, not only as useless but also as inferior when compared to those of the conventional universities. Their opaque arguments for casting aspersions on distance education institutions (DEIs) may centre on their individual doubts on the quality and massification, as well as the incidence of possible masquerading identity. Closely related to this is the general notion of whether the DEI or ODL, in any way, adhere to professional ethics or academic

standards. Adherence to high academic standards, which is informed through the doggedly pursued predetermined ethics, has a predictable relationship to professional behaviour and academic integrity of the ODL, at least comparatively. Ethical principles are known indexes in organizational direction and commitments, but its lapses erode known standards in academic and research ventures, as well as the quality of community service.

INTRODUCTION

An important dimension confronting professional behaviour and academic credibility, especially in ODL today, is the challenge of multiple meanings with the concomitant dual interpretation of workplace academic standards or ethics. This chapter specifically addresses these issues with the attempt to operationalize workplace ethics generally and distance education (DE) in particular. As part of the objective, therefore, the broad spectrum of this chapter is to examine the meaning of ethics and academic standards (otherwise, professional boundaries), its role in distance education, the synthesis of the emerging ethical issues in DE, the control mechanisms required to maintain quality in distance education and its various interconnectivity in academic integrity, organizational commitments in conventional programmes and online cheating in ODL. The chapter also discusses some suggested methods for curtailing ethical abuses, and thus improving professional behaviour and academic credibility in DELs.

BACKGROUND

In education generally, but in open distance learning (ODL) in particular, the issue of ethical standards or simply ethics, especially as it defines strict professional behaviour and academic credibility, has had its debate both conjecturally and age long. Over time, the dimension of what aspect of professional behaviour or discipline should constitute the "right," or the "wrong" otherwise obnoscious practice, often attract multiple inter-pretations the world over. Unfortunately though, despite the pace of our educational development, institutions of higher learning (IHL) still have difficulties both in the interpretation and application of institutional rules and regulations, especially when there are disciplinary crises.

The word "ethics," however, may be more appreciated within the tripod interconnectivity of "ethics," "philosophy" and "morals," which share a lot of proximity in terms of their depth of meaning and somehow, on how they are applied, especially within education. Taken from the Latin word "ethica" and from the Ancient Greek "ήθική" (φιλοσοφία), it means "moral philosophy" which is equally derived from the adjective of "ήθοc ēthos" indicating either "custom," "traditions" or "habit" and which all indicate a fundamental branch of philosophy, which as well encompasses the right conduct and good life. While morals essentially connote the practice of right or good actions, the term "ethics" defines the theory of "right action" and "greater good;" but philosophy, without equivocation, gives meanings to their logics. Without doubt therefore, it is usually and often the case when such terms as "professional ethics" or "ethics of the profession" otherwise, "workplace ethics" are used to define the limits, coverage, and boundaries for members, within which organizational goals and objectives are pursued. Organizational (work or professional) ethics specifies standards that should give premium on how professional behaviour or tasks are to be facilitated while recognizing the worth, dignity, potentials and uniqueness of personnels who are the driving force within the existing socio-cultural and politico-economic contexts.

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