

PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS ON PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AMONG ACADEMIC STAFF IN SOUTH EASTERN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT: The study assessed perceptions of students on professional ethics among academic staff in southeastern Nigerian universities. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design. The study population was drawn from federal, state, and private universities in the Southern zone of Nigeria to ensure fair representation. The study involved 60 students in FGDs across federal, state, and private universities in South Eastern Nigeria. The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) methodology was employed as a primary instrument for data collection in this study. Audio recordings were utilized to capture the participants' contributions accurately, which were subsequently transcribed for analysis. The study revealed prevalent lapses in ethical conduct, with students highlighting issues of extortion and lack of accountability. The study also indicated that the incidence of unethical situations is the responsibility of all stakeholders. Policymakers like the National Universities Commission (NUC) and the federal and state ministries of Education will find this study useful when formulating policies relating to academics in the university. The study recommended that the government ensure strict adherence or conformity with professional ethics.

Keywords: Academic Staff, Ethics, Professional, Students Perceptions, Universities

BACKGROUND

Unethical professional work behaviour has been a problem in many globally. These behaviours affect the organization and its members (Safarzadeh et al., 2012). According to Chirasha and Mahapa (2011), in the United States of America, the country lost a lot of money from workplace violence, internet surfing during working hours, shoplifting, and absenteeism in 2011. Workplace deviance can be caused by the following in organizations: Unethical behaviours are counterproductive in organisations.

However, the quality of educational output in Nigerian federal universities has become a serious concern to society. A decline in the educational output of students in federal universities has generated so much uproar among stakeholders in the education sector (Kehinde, 2021) The Nigerian Institute of Personnel Management (NIPM), National Employers of Consultative Association (NECA), and other similar organizations have decried and argued that the quality of graduates from Nigerian universities is rapidly declining and does not meet the demands of the industry. In 2017, the case of the Kaduna State competency test conducted for teachers indicated that Nigerian graduates who become teachers appear to be inadequately prepared in both content and pedagogy and are not so knowledgeable about teaching staff professional ethics, let alone

adhere to them. This invariably contributes negatively to the quality of graduates being churned out. Education occupies the most strategic position in Nigeria's struggle for national development, and such struggles cannot be successful in the absence of professional ethics-compliant teachers. Teachers are models of moral and pro-social behaviours, and as such, their actions and attitudes can greatly affect students' sense of justice and perception of the moral code. The teachers' code of professional ethics is well articulated and known by teachers, but how well are teachers adhering or committed to these codes? The level of commitment, adherence and implementation seems to be quite low. There is no recourse to the code of ethics by teachers as a lot of abnormal situations still pervade the educational system. Some teachers seem to have poor knowledge about this code of ethics, while some who are aware of the code seem not to adhere to it. The code is not just a listing of what teachers are to do habitually or only when it is convenient, but consists of rules which are standards guiding the conduct of a professional teacher.

According to Ohia (2002) and Dimkpa (2011), unethical academic practices among lecturers in Nigerian universities are a problem requiring scholarly attention because they hinder qualitative university education. For instance, the falling standard of education in Nigeria has partly been attributed to the demand for gratification by lecturers (Okebukola 2005). Furthermore, Ebouh and Nweke (2017), posited that the issue of unethical academic practices affects students' achievement in tertiary institutions. They further opined that lecturers extort money by selling handouts to students, engaging in plagiarism and exchange of money for grades. Whawo (2015) identified that in universities and higher institutions in Nigeria, examination malpractices, financial extortions, and illicit sexual intercourse with female students are also some of the violations of professional ethics. All these impacts negatively on the students by encouraging cheating in examinations, delayed absorption of graduates into the labour market and production of poor quality of graduates. A recent study by Nwogu and Adieme (2017) on the universities in the South-East zone focused mainly on innovative techniques for managing corporate, corrupt practices in universities in the South-East. It is therefore the major challenge of this study to investigate the extent to which professional ethics guide the behaviour of academic staff in South Eastern Nigerian universities, as perceived by students

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dimensions of Unethical Work Behaviour

The problem of teachers' unethical behaviour is still addressed in research today. In the study conducted by Yıldırım, Albez, and Akan (2020), unethical behaviours such as showing more interest in successful students, being prejudiced against students, not showing interest in students who create problems, ignoring students of low socio-economic status and with low family interest, ignoring individual differences, not sharing information with colleagues, threatening students with giving bad grades, acting in an anti-democratic and selfish way, exploiting the administration for their personal interests, gossiping, expecting privileges, accepting gifts, exploiting students for personal gain, and sharing students' private information were the most prominent ones. Behaviours such as neglect of duty, ill-treatment of students, and gaining unfair advantages can also be reflected in stakeholder perceptions (Yılmaz & Argon 2020). Moreover, teaching classes without preparation, incurring excessive debts and not paying them, dealing with his/her private affairs

during working hours, expressing their ideological views to students, coming to class late or leaving early, getting a medical report despite not being sick, being careless at work, carrying out commercial activities with a student or parent, and religion- or ethnicity-based discrimination are some of the unethical behaviours voiced in the press (Sam, 2021).

The majority of studies on unethical professional practices among teachers in China have focused on in-service instructors (Guo, 2017; Zhang, 2017; Cai, 2019). According to Eren and Rakıcıoğlu-Söylemez (2017) and Eren and Rakcolu-Sylemez (2021), student instructors have a definite career orientation and may engage in unethical professional activity that affects their students. The following is a summary of a series of empirical research on unethical professional behaviour trends among in-service teachers and student teachers: In terms of teaching, discussions on unethical professional behaviour tendencies have primarily focused on superficiality, carelessness, and injustice (Guo, 2017; Zhang, 2017). Barrett et al. (2022) discovered that unethical professional conduct tendencies, such as carelessness and unfair treatment of students, are also common among American instructors. Teachers' sincerity and partiality in teaching are strongly associated to students' academic accomplishment, while educational fairness is related to long-term educational growth (Brunila and Kallioniemi, 2018). In terms of life outside of school, a prevalent unethical professional activity is instructors abusing their authority for personal benefit (Zhao, 2009; Zhang, 2017). Eren and Rakıcıoğlu-Söylemez (2017) report that such behaviour has caused a public revolution in both China and Turkey. Because juveniles have immature values and are easily influenced, when teachers use their power for personal benefit, it has an impact on their growth and future successes (Liu, 2021). Teachers' physical and mental insults and discrimination, which occur both during and outside of school, are examples of unethical professional behaviour that has a substantial influence on children. Several studies found that insults and discrimination toward students are some of the most common unethical professional behaviours of primary and secondary school teachers, and this behavior not only directly harms students' physical and mental health but also causes other students to become prejudiced against the victims (Zhang, 2017; Ssenyonga et al., 2019).

Students and Public perception of Academics Professional Ethics and Quality Assurance

Okar, Okaro and Egbunike (2019) examine the students' perceptions of ethics and the implication of such views for national development using cheating in an academic situation as an indicator of unethical behaviours. A total of 311 undergraduate students, 176 female and 135 male were surveyed. These students were given a set of questions about different instances of academic cheating that are common among students on a 5- 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not dishonest) to 5 (very severe dishonesty) to indicate their behaviours towards these situations; their responses describe their sense of ethics. The T-test of the difference between means and ANOVA were used to statistically analyse the differences between the mean scores. The study found, among other things, that an average student sees cheating as dishonesty but not as a very serious evil. No significant difference was found between the female and the male students though the female students were seen to be more ethical. Year one students were seen to be more ethical than other classes. These findings indicate that there is a need for ethical promotion and education, and if ethical education is not encouraged in our institutions of higher learning, the students who are tomorrow's leaders and professionals may not be able to support and sustain national development.

Since the female are found to be more ethical, engaging and encouraging them in their professions will definitely promote a better ethical atmosphere, which is a booster to national development. This study sees unethical behaviour as a bane to national development, while ethical behaviour is seen as a key factor that supports national development.

Chen, Saharuddin, and Muhamad (2024), in a qualitative study, explored Chinese private college students' perceptions of the concept of ethical behaviour in academic work. Bandura's social cognitive theory examined and analysed students' perceptions and perspectives on ethical behaviour in academic work. To assess participants' perceptions, one-on-one semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and reflection in narrative story writing were conducted. The study sample consisted of five participants from three private colleges in three cities in China. According to the findings of the content analysis, Chinese private college students' perspectives on the concept of ethical behaviour in academic work are social and professional academic ethics and academic malpractices. Meanwhile, Chinese private college students' perspectives of the concept of ethical behaviour in academic work are academic misconduct and academic professional standards. The results have practical significance for helping private college students overcome ethical behaviour problems in academic work.

Riaz (2019) also noted that having academic integrity is important for several reasons. First, having academic integrity means that others can trust you. The people with whom you deal can perceive one as acting honestly and uprightly. When people know that you believe in doing the right thing and that your behaviour is consistent with that belief, they trust you. Additionally, trust is one of the key characteristics of a successful leader. These individuals develop good reputations by being honest, fair, and trustworthy, for example. Individuals who are successful in business understand the benefits of acting with integrity. Our world (including the business community) is based on our ability to trust each other. Therefore, developing good ethical habits now, while you are in college, will help you as you enter the workplace and face ethical issues (which most certainly will happen). Having academic integrity is important because it provides value to academic degrees. Employers prefer to hire graduates whom they believe have high personal integrity. They would instead invest in developing the human capital of someone who will be a positive influence on the organization and on someone whom they can trust to carry out the company's mission.

The issue of students' perception of academic staff quality was ably captured by Uche (2022) in research entitled "Students' perceptions of academic staff quality: a measure of quality assurance in South-South Nigerian Higher Institutions". The research drew a sample of 2,000 final-year students from a population of 4,000 across five faculties from 8 institutions in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. A stratified random sampling technique was used in the study. Standard deviation, t-test, mean scores and correlation coefficient were employed as statistical tools. The study used a descriptive survey design. The research findings include the following: students rated the quality of professional competence but rated their supervision low, and students were of the view that lecturers do not have enough time and don't prepare their notes well.

METHODOLOGY

Design of the Study

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design. Obikezie (1990) opines that this type of research design tries to get an overview of all the subjects and a total perception of the situation of issues at a given time through the use of interviews, questionnaires, and other methods. According to him, information is extracted from a fraction or cross-section of the population of a given period. Given its considerable merits, the cross-sectional survey design is regarded as the most suitable for this type of study, considering the size of the population.

Study Population

The study population was drawn from federal, state, and private universities in the Southern zone of Nigeria to ensure fair representation; the University of Nigeria, Nsukka represented federal universities, Ebonyi State University (EBSU) Abakaliki represented state universities, and Gregory University, Uturu, (GUU) stood for private universities. The universities of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) has 2245 academic staff (Personnel Unit, Registry Department UNN, 2017), Ebonyi State University (EBSU), Abakaliki has 898 academic staff (Personnel Department, EBSU 2017), while Gregory University, Uturu, (GUU) has 176 academic staff (Registry Department GUU, 2017).

Table 1: Schedule of Universities and number of Academic Staff

<u>Universities</u>	<u>Number of Academic Staff</u>
UNN	2245
EBSU	898
GUU	176
Total	3319

Source: Registry of the universities studied.

Instrument for Data Collection

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was used as an instrument for the collection. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted among undergraduates because undergraduates are mostly the alleged victims of unethical practices by lecturers. This also offered them the opportunity to express their opinion on the topic. Two (2) FGDs were conducted in each university. These FGD are as follows: ten (10) males and ten (10) females and this makes 20 participants in each university. A total of 6 FGD sessions were conducted in all. Participants in the FGD were purposefully selected and also did not take part in the questionnaire schedule. These FGDs were

conducted at locations, times and days chosen by the participants. Transcripts of FGD sessions were compiled for proper analysis. However, tape recorders and notebooks were used to collect responses from the participants.

Methods of Data Analysis

Tapes were used to record what was actually said and transcribed. The transcription was done in the local language and translated into English. In going through the transcriptions, phrases with contextual or unique connotations were noted and pulled out as illustrative quotes to complement the questionnaire data. To do this, relevant themes were developed for the coding and sorting of the qualitative data.

FINDINGS

Socio-demographic characteristics for the FGDs and IDI conducted.

The socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), Ebonyi State University (EBSU) and Gregory University, Uteru (GUU),) who participated in the IDIs are displayed in Table 4.2

Table 2: Socio-demographic characteristics of female undergraduates for the FGD in UNN

S/N	Department	Age	Marital status	Religion	Level
1	Foreign Languages	25 years	Married	Christian	300 Level
2	Music	21 years	Single	Christian	200 Level
3	Fine Art	22 years	Single	Christian	200 Level
4	Chemistry	31 years	Married	TAR	300 Level
5	Physics	22 years	Single	Christian	200 Level
6	Computer Science	29 years	Single	Christian	300 Level
7	Social Science Education	30 years	Single	Christian	300 Level
8	Pharmacy	22 years	Single	Christian	200 Level
9	Mass Communication	23 years	Single	Christian	300 Level
10	Agric. Extension	27 years	Single	No Religion	300 Level

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2019.

Data in Table 2 revealed that out of the ten respondents who participated in the FGD session for women from the University of Nigeria, two were married, while eight were single. Regarding their religious beliefs, eight were Christians, one believed in Traditional African Religion (TAR), and one did not mention her religion. Ten departments were sampled, including foreign languages, music, fine art, chemistry, physics, computer science, social science education, pharmacy, mass communication, and agricultural extension. Their ages were: 25 years, 21 years, 22 years, 31 years, 22 years, 29 years, 30 years, 22 years, 23 years and 27 years. Finally, for this table, their level are 300, 200, 200, 300, 200, 300, 300, 200, 300, and 300.

Table 3: Socio-demographic characteristics of male undergraduates for the FGD in UNN

S/N	Department	Age	Marital status	Religion	Level
1	Economics	25 years	Single	Christian	300
2	Public Admin.	22 years	Single	Christian	400
3	Political science	29 years	Single	Christian	400
4	Philosophy	26 years	Single	Christian	200
5	English Language	22 years	Single	Christian	200
6	Biochemistry	29 years	Single	Christian	300
7	Computer	25 years	Single	Christian	300
8	Agricultural Economics Extension	24 years	Single	Christian	300
9	Crop Science	21 years	Single	Christian	200
10	Civil Engineering	28 years	Single	TAR	300

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2019.

Table 3 indicated that out of all the ten male respondents who participated in this FGD session from UNN, all were single. Again, nine were Christians, while one practiced Traditional African Religion (TAR). The departments' lecturers were sampled from economics and public administration. political science, philosophy, English language, biochemistry, computer, agric. economics extension, crop science and civil engineering. The participants' ages were 25 years, 22 years, 29 years, 26 years, 22 years, 29 years, 25 years, 24 years, 21 years and 28 years. Their academic levels are 300, 400, 400, 200, 200, 300, 300, 300, 200 and 300

Table 4: Socio-demographic characteristics of female undergraduates for the FGD in EBSU

S/N	Department	Age	Marital Status	Religion	Level
1	Food Science	25 years	Single	Christian	300
2	Soil Management	32 years	Married	Christian	300
3	Animal Science	22 years	Single	Christian	200
4	Public Admin	26 years	Single	Christian	200
5	Marketing	22 years	Single	Christian	200
6	Economics	25 years	Single	Christian	400
7	Sociology	26 years	Single	Christian	400
8	History and International Relations	22 years	Single	Christian	200
9	Mass Communication	24 years	Single	Christian	300
10	French	23 years	Single	Christian	200

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2019.

The information displayed in Table 4 showed that all participants were Christians; one of them was married, and the others were single. Their departments were food science, soil management, animal science, public admin, marketing, economics, sociology, history and international relations, mass communication and French. Their ages were: 25 years, 32 years, 22 years, 26 years, 22 years, 25 years, 26 years, 22 years, 24 years and 23 years. Also, their academic levels were 300, 300, 200, 200, 200, 400, 400, 200, 300 and 200.

Table 5: Socio-demographic characteristics of male undergraduates that participated in the FGDEBSU

S/N	Department	Age	Marital status	Religion	Level
1	Psychology	34 years	Married	Christian	400
2	Linguistics	22 years	Single	Christian	300
3	Anatomy	24 years	Single	Christian	400
4	Biotechnology	23 years	Single	Christian	300
5	Geology	22 years	Single	Christian	100
6	Physics	27 years	Single	Christian	300
7	Human Kinetics	25 years	Single	Christian	200
8	Social Studies Edu	23 years	Single	Christian	200
9	Religious Education	21 years	Single	Christian	200
10	Health Education	25 years	Single	Christian	300

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2019.

Entries in Table 5 showed that out of the ten respondents, one was married while others were single. Again, all the respondents were Christians. Their departments were psychology, linguistics, anatomy, biotechnology, geology, physics, human kinetics, social studies education, religious education and health education. Their ages were: 34 years, 22 years, 24 years, 22 years, 23 years, 27 years, 25 years, 23 years, 21 years and 25 years. In terms of their academic level in school 400, 300, 400, 300, 100, 300, 200, 200, 200 and 300.

Table 6: Socio-demographic characteristics of female undergraduates for the FGD in GUU

S/N	Department	Age	Marital status	Religion	Level
1	Human Physiology	25 years	Married	Christian	300
2	Anatomy	22 years	Single	Christian	200
3	Geology	19 years	Single	Christian	100
4	Biology	20 years	Single	Christian	200
5	Computer Science	21 years	Single	Christian	300
6	Sociology	19 years	Single	Christian	100
7	Mass Communication	22 years	Single	Christian	200
8	Political Science	22 years	Single	Christian	300
9	English Language	20 years	Single	Christian	200
10	Law	24 years	Married	Christianity	300

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2019.

The information displayed in Table 6 showed that all female participants of this study were Christians; eight of them were single, and two were married. Their various departments consist of: Human Physiology, Anatomy, Geology, Biology, Computer science, Sociology, Mass Communication, Political science, English Language and Law. Their ages include the following: 25 years, 22 years, 19 years, 20 years, 21 years, 19 years, 22 years, 22 years, 20 years and 24 years and finally, their academic levels were 300, 200, 100, 200, 300, 200, 100, 300, 200 and 300.

Table 7: Socio-demographic characteristics of male undergraduates for the FGD in GUU

S/N	Department	Age	Marital status	Religion	Level
1	English Language	22 years	Single	Christian	200
2	Physics	21 years	Single	Christian	200
3	Chemistry	19 years	Single	Christian	100
4	Sociology	20 years	Single	Christian	100
5	Computer Science	19 years	Single	Christian	100
6	Theatre Art	22 years	Single	Christian	300
7	Chemistry	23 years	Single	Christian	200
8	Law	22 years	Single	Christian	300
9	Political Science	23 years	Single	Christian	400
10	Mass Communication	21 years	Single	Christian	100

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2019.

Data in Table 7 showed that all participants were married. In terms of their departments, the participants listed English language, physics, chemistry, sociology, computer science, theatre art, chemistry, law, political science and mass communication. All the participants were Christians, and their ages were 22 years, 21 years, 19 years, 20 years, 19 years, 22 years, 23 years, 22 years, 23 years and 21 years, while their academic levels were 200, 200, 100, 100, 100, 300, 200, 300, 400 and 100

Perception of professional ethics as a guide to work behaviour

An FGD with women of EBSU revealed that often, most lectures are not guided by professional ethical standards as they still act carelessly. According to a female respondent from EBSU, some lecturers feel they are indispensable and that they can do anything for a student and that without them, that student cannot graduate (EBSU, 32 years, women FGD). However, a female student affirmed:

I don't think they have given the required attention to ethical behaviour. That is why you can see some academic staff or lecturers do some things, and they go fee. How can a lecturer be asking for money so he can pass an exam? Another will not request money but sex from female students, while some will not want to attend to you even when you have a problem and you want assistance. This is not good. For me, the school management has not done enough to stop this; otherwise, it would have stopped (Female participant EBSUFGD, 2019).

What factors do students perceive as affecting lecturers' professional ethical disposition?

The qualitative data showed that everyone, whether male or female, married or not, is ethically bound to be of good behaviour. An FGD participant stated that ethically, the married ones are more

compliant than the unmarried ones. But seriously, everyone is bound to be ethically reasonable (Female participant GUU FGD, 2019).

Again, an FGD with females of EBSU also showed that poor remuneration promotes unethical behaviour. A respondent stated thus:

Poor remuneration, like a poor salary, is a problem. Most people, because of the low pay, engage in unethical practices to solve their family problems because their salary cannot cover them. To solve this problem, prompt payment of salary increments and job security are also needed (EBSU, FGD, 2019).

According to a female FGD session, a respondent opined that most lecturers' attitude in GUU towards professional ethics is neutral; they see it as their duty.

It is the fault of everyone both the government, the school management and even the students. The government will owe lecturers money for a long time. What will u expect? Many of them have families and children and other relatives to take care of. The school management is not doing enough to stop bad behaviour among the staff because it is the colleague. Then, some students are willing to do anything to pass their courses which is also a problem

DISCUSSIONS

Perception of professional ethics

Professional ethics is the search to qualitatively and systemically improve the grade of humanisation of social and industrial life through the exercise of the profession, interpreted profession, interpreted as the correct performance of its activity in the social context in which humans develop (Navia &Hirsch, 2015). In this study, assessing the perception of respondents on whether professional ethics guides work behaviour was necessary. The study found that 74.6% of the respondents perceived professional ethics to affect their behaviour. This study explains that of Leblebici (2012). According to a study by Leblebici (2012) on the impact of workplace quality on employees, 90% of the respondents admitted that their attitude to work was adversely affected by the quality of their workplace environment.

From the qualitative study, the perceived ways professional ethics guides behaviour is in the area of punctuality and observing lecture time, meetings and seminars. Also, from the cross-tabulation, the study found that 78.7% of male respondents perceived that professional ethics affects their work behaviour. In terms of religion, one would expect Christians to negate the role played by professional ethics in the workplace since Christianity holds high morals, but an overwhelming 76.8% said that professional ethics affect their behaviour in the university. Findings from this study also showed that the majority (42.4%) of the respondents perceived that their personal judgment was more effective than those made following known professional ethics. This finding means one's

personal opinion and the existence of professional ethics go hand-in-hand in improving our institutions of learning. The major reason personal judgment played a vital role in adherence to professional ethics was that 49.0% said they had personally developed a strong ethical standard even before the university's ethical standard came into play. This finding may explain why (Akonti, 2013) opined that attitudes towards work become internalised and work performance is less dependent on the reactions of others (Akonti, 2013). Again, the study also found that 43.9% are not quite sure if professional ethics poses any intimidation.

Conclusion

The study determined that ethical conduct has not received adequate attention from all stakeholders in the Nigerian education industry. The incidence of unethical situations is the responsibility of all stakeholders. The enforcement of codes and behaviour will coincide with the maintenance of professional ethics in Nigerian educational institutions. It is consequently recommended that the government ensure strict adherence or conformity with professional ethics. Furthermore, school administrators should not forgive anyone who violates the ethics of his or her profession. This is done to ensure that Nigeria meets its tertiary education goals. Code interpretation must be uniform and equitable. Those involved in the process must be knowledgeable about the code and precedents, as well as aware that leaders and administrators have a responsibility to fulfil their jobs.

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