

A Question of Ethics: Tertiary-Level Teaching in Botswana

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Botswana, like many smaller developing nations, has one university (the University of Botswana), through which all degrees are awarded, including those earned at its sister institute, the Botswana College of Agriculture. However, unlike most developing nations, since independence in 1966 Botswana has grown from one of the poorest countries in the world to one with a stable and vibrant economy. This has enabled it to aspire to a tertiary education system equal to any in the developed world.

An integral part of this aspiration involved employment of expatriate academic staff while local staff acquired training. This system has proved a mixed blessing. Most expatriates are employed on two-year contracts, with little critical examination of their credentials (e.g., no interviews below the professorial level and no analysis of teaching or research performance beyond years of experience and crude paper counts). Furthermore, localization has been approached through the fast-tracking of citizens, with little opportunity to accumulate appropriate experience. This strategy, together with a lack of effective quality assurance and accountability, has led to the use of unethical behavior, notably in teaching and research, to achieve contract renewal or promotion. Research problems have been discussed elsewhere (e.g., an article by I. Riddoch, in *Nature*, vol. 408, 2000). The focus here is on unethical teaching practices in tertiary institutions in Botswana, and their wider implications.

In practice, teaching appraisal is based on a few rather unreliable criteria that are used inconsistently, making abuses easy to mask and perpetuate. Essentially all a lecturer has to do is have a high apparent teaching load and ensure a high pass rate. Consequently, most abuses are aimed at reducing teaching effort, through plagiarism and abandonment of teaching responsibilities and avoiding accountability, by exam-directed teaching and manipulation of marks.

Inflation, Plagiarism, and Abandonment

The illusion of intense teaching activity and creativity is maintained by setting up specialized advanced level graduate courses with small classes (student numbers being irrelevant to appraisal), which creates the

impression of a high teaching load with conceptually more demanding courses. Once courses have been assigned colleagues and superiors display little or no curiosity about how or what students are taught. A significant proportion of classroom periods are, quite literally, abandoned. Actual teaching frequently commences a week or two into a semester and finishes a week or two before its end. The current deputy vice chancellor (for academic affairs) of the university recently reprimanded the entire academic staff, for this avoidance of teaching responsibilities, but it still persists. Individual classes may run for only a fraction of the allotted time, and any excuse is used to cancel classes completely. More onerous and time-consuming chores such as running labs and marking assignments are delegated to demonstrators or teaching assistants, often with little or no supervision.

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Little effort is put into course content; syllabuses are rarely revised, and course outlines and even entire courses may be plagiarized from the Internet. Considerable, sometimes total, duplication of course material may occur across supposedly different programs, often taught to the same students at different levels. In some cases, higher-level courses are even simplifications of material covered by more conscientious colleagues teaching the large lower-level courses. Course outlines and manuals submitted for appraisal are often gross exaggerations of what is actually taught.

Avoiding Accountability

Many staff have little or no conscience about the quality of the students they produce and will do whatever it takes to ensure that poor teaching is not revealed by poor student performance. The abandonment of teaching responsibilities actually benefits students, who are generally fixated on grades, as it lightens their course load. Furthermore, lecturers deliberately prime students by addressing only those questions they have set for exams. Former students freely admit that many staff leak review topics, usually using broad hints or direct instructions about what material to review. We have even come across an example where the questions asked on continuous assessment tests, review sheets, and the fi-

nal exam were identical and appeared to represent all that was taught in the course despite an impressive syllabus. Needless to say, not a single student reported this information: the practice was only discovered by accident.

Exam questions tend toward the prescriptive, partly because rote learning is easier for students, but also because simple lists of points are easy to mark. When monitoring exams and marking student work, many lecturers turn a blind eye to cheating and overlook errors, merely checking off the good points.

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Implications

Unfortunately, unethical teaching practices not only detract from the reputations of academic institutions but have serious consequences for Botswana's long-term social and economic future. Already the country is overly dependent on a single resource, diamonds (85 percent of foreign earnings for 2002) and is ravaged by HIV/AIDS. A failure to produce well-educated citizens will merely exacerbate these problems, and it is imperative that training be more than just a paper exercise.

Recent speeches by the state president suggest that the government recognizes that there are problems with tertiary education, in terms of product quality and value for money, but it has yet to publicly acknowledge that issues of staff integrity have, at least in part, contributed to these problems. Sadly, we do not believe these problems are restricted to Botswana. Many of the worst culprits are expatriate staff on contracts who are attracted to Botswana by the regionally high salaries and bring various unethical practises with them. However, permanent local staff are beginning to follow the expatriates' successes and will themselves become evaluators of teaching quality here. The cancer is in danger of becoming truly malignant unless something is done about it soon. ■

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Corruption and Higher Education in Georgia

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The Republic of Georgia, with a population of 5 million, has roughly 240 higher education institutions. On the surface, these numbers would suggest a prospering, highly educated society. However, behind this facade lies the reality of degraded standards, crumbling infrastructure, rampant academic fraud, and overall deteriorating educational quality.

At the center of this predicament is pervasive systemic corruption. Economic, institutional, and organizational inadequacies have brought about a widespread extralegal system of governance, characterized by few ethical norms or standards. The passivity of the Georgian people and their willingness to accept this as the status quo have further exacerbated these deficiencies.

Description of Corruption

Corruption may be defined as an improper use of official authority for personal or material benefit. Corruption in higher education manifests itself at all levels and affects a wide array of institutional activities. Major avenues for corruption include the system of admissions, the professional conduct of teachers and administrators, procurement, and the licensing and accreditation of institutions.

The most corrupt area in the Georgian higher education system is perhaps admissions. The system is unfair and inefficient, often characterized by bribery and high levels of subjective criteria. As a result of biased oral examinations, even the least-qualified candidates can easily gain admission to the university system. Some estimates suggest that the majority of available slots are actually sold to prospective students. By some anecdotal reports, the price for university admission may range anywhere from \$200 to \$10,000, depending on the prestige of a university department and a student's qualifications (average monthly salary in Georgia is \$50).

Corruption is manifested indirectly through a system of private tutors who prepare students for entrance examinations. But unlike private tutoring in Europe and North America, in Georgia the fees students pay are, in fact, bribes passed on through the system to ensure admission to the department of their choice.