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Maintenance Of Professional Ethics In A Nigerian Higher Institution Of Learning: Stakeholders Views On The Best Practices

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ABSTRACT

The study assessed the level of maintenance of professional ethics as perceived by the stakeholders among the University staff members in a Nigerian University System. It also determined the perceived loopholes in the enforcement process of professional ethics in the study area and examined stakeholders' suggested best practices in the maintenance of professional ethics in the university system and finally determined the difference in the level of enforcement of professional ethics as perceived by the academic and non-academic staff in the study area. The study employed descriptive survey research design. The sample size was made up of 150 academic staffs and 100 non-academic staff that were selected using simple random sampling technique. An instrument titled: Professional Ethics Questionnaire (PEQ) was used to collect data for the study. Data collected were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and t-test statistics. The results among others showed that stakeholders were found to have low level of enforcement of professional ethics. Also, there was no significant difference in the academic and non-academic staff assessment of the enforcement of professional ethics ($t_{(248)} = 0.191$; $p > 0.05$) in the study area. The study concluded that religious affiliations depict a major perceived loophole in the enforcement process of professional ethics in the Nigerian Universities System.

Keywords: Professional Ethics, Higher Institution, Stakeholders, Best practices

INTRODUCTION

Axiology is concern with the goodness and beauty of life. Its assumption focuses on the appreciation of attributes and values of life. This school of thought explains two branches of wisdom, aesthetic and ethic. Aesthetic deals with appreciation of beauty and quality while ethic is all about what is morally good/right or morally wrong. It has been observed in the African cultural setting that moral and beauty are very much connected. For instance, the possession of the two is hold in high esteem among the Yoruba people while the absence of any is seen as a weakness in an individual. To the

Yoruba people ethic is the major aspect of the philosophy of axiology thus they attach great importance to it. This implies that somebody can be beautiful or brilliant but lack good moral. The idea of assessing cultural beauty and quality through moral standard is genuine, nothing is beautiful, nothing is good and nothing has been achieved if there is no moral justification. The conceptual analysis of Yoruba adage that says 'Iwa lewa omo eniyan' or 'iwa rere lesu eniyan' meaning good moral is the beauty of man established the importance of ethic above aesthetic in Yoruba culture.

Apart from aesthetic as a twin sister of ethic, scholars see religion as another phenomenon relating with ethic. Religious beliefs may be central to the ethical stance of some people (Barrett 2015). Generally, it is expected of a religious person to be morally good. But it is not at all times or not all religious persons are morally good. In that case such an individual seem to lack ethic. Whereas there are some people who have no religious affiliation and are still morally good (these people are called moralists). The level at which religion beliefs reflect in ethical principles or ethic reflect in religion beliefs is difficult to be determined except when it comes to the demonstration of code of ethic. So, it may be wrong to trust something of a high level of ethical values to somebody because is a religious person, it is as well not good enough to judge the ethical value of individual based on his level of religious profession. The fact that some religious persons find it difficult to be morally upright and intentionally or freely choose good moral inform the need to enforce ethical code.

Ethics is a very crucial experience in the human society. It shows the social, behavioural, religious way or manner that is right, acceptable and expected to be exhibited among people. It is concerned with the study of morals that deals with the distinction between right and wrong based on the tradition and culture of a people, religion, profession and so on (Enamiroro & Okpilike 2012). Therefore, ethic is a branch of philosophy that deals with the theory of value. It involves doing the right thing always. It is the reflection on rightness or wrongness of a particular act, law or rule with moral duty and obligation (Ajayi & Adeniji, 2009, Iroegbu and Uyanga 2019). Ethical behavior occurs when one acts with equity, fairness/impartiality and respects the rights of others (Ogunleye, 2000).

According to Nwizu (2018) every culture, institution and profession has laid down ethical codes established for itself, which stakeholders must strictly adhere to shape that society's values, beliefs and behaviours. Sherman (2020) defines ethics in the workplace as the application of moral principles, standards of behaviour, or set of values regarding proper conduct in the workplace as individuals and in a group setting. Professional ethics deals with the code of conduct guiding a particular profession. It is defined as a set of rules and principles that encompasses responsibilities among professionals, whether as colleagues, clients or society in general (Otalor & Eiya, 2013). The principle of right or wrong varies with culture, institution and profession. What is right in one setting might be wrong in the other this depends majorly on the nature and the goal of such groups.

Teaching as a profession has its ethics which all stakeholders in the teaching profession is expected to guard diligently. The ethics of the teaching profession are the moral beliefs and rules about right and wrongs that influence teachers behaviour, attitude and ideals. Schools (including university system) contain teachers who are workers that are controlled with codes of ethics, codes of conduct and ethics committees, policies and processes to resolve ethical dilemmas (Oke, 2009). The importance of ethical issues in educational institution was also supported by *Puhan, Malla, and Behera, (2014)* that the ethical dimensions are considered to be important in educational system

and are present in several legislative documents, both with regard to the education of pupils and to teacher education, and regarded as important for professional performance.

The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014) has clearly outlined the goals that are expected of the tertiary education to achieve. It should be noted that the achievement of these goals is dependent on strict compliance to professional ethics. Kayode and Adeyinka (2009) affirmed that it is only on strict compliance, conformity, and adherence to rules and regulations and the ideals of the society that the overall goals of the tertiary education as stipulated by the National Policy on Education can be achieved. Gilman (2005) believed that ethics codes become more effective over time. The longer they are in place the more natural they seem to the public service environment. They also become integrated into the overall management structure and are seen by the public as an effective tool. He demands adequate knowledge of the code and fairness in the management of the system. He also suggested two effective approaches Training of the stakeholders on the rule of the code of conduct because familiarity with regulations would allow public employees to know what is expected of them, and where to look up the rules if they are unclear. The notion of education emphasizes reasoning from principles. This approach could begin with general principles that no public employee should descend below and then emphasize the code of conduct.

Aduma and Auwal, (2007) identified some common unethical conduct at the tertiary level which includes lecturers extorting money from students, conduct of armchair research, sexual harassment by both lecturers and students. Others include plagiarism, unduly delay in the marking and release of examination results, and leaking examination questions among others. These unethical practices are largely disturbing the minds of stakeholders as it interfere with the learning of the students. It is wrong to select leadership of ethics programs based on qualifications and areas of specialization having the mindset that a theologian, a lawyer or a philosopher would be an ideal choice. These professional backgrounds are not a guarantee of success and in some cases might be a detriment. Someone who has worked in corruption prevention and who has a pristine reputation for integrity would be a more effective choice (Gilman, 2005). Following this observation, it is pertinent to examine how professional ethics in Nigerian higher institution of learning is being sustained.

Statement of the Problem

The essentiality of professional ethics in teaching profession cannot be over emphasized. As much as it encapsulates the conduct expected of members of the teaching profession and guides the social and religious way or manner that is acceptable and expected to be exhibited among stakeholders especially in tertiary institutions. This is believed would help in the achievement of the tertiary education goals. However, the alarming rate at which the teachers' professional ethics is flaunted in Nigeria by stakeholders of the profession is saddening. It has been realised that there are some unethical conducts among the stakeholders in the Nigerian tertiary institutions areas of recruitment, promotion and appointment of staff, lecturers extorting money from students, sexual harassment by both lecturers and students and plagiarism, to mention a few. Research is inconclusive on the extent at which professional ethics have been enforced to deal with unethical issues in Nigerian higher institutions; hence this study.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine stakeholders' views on best practices in the maintenance of professional ethics through educational policies in higher institutions of learning in Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives are to:

1. assess the level of maintenance of professional ethics as perceived by the stakeholders among the University staff members in a Nigerian University System;
2. determine the perceived loopholes in the maintenance process of professional ethics in the Nigerian Universities System;
3. examine stakeholders' suggested best practices in the maintenance of professional ethics in the university system; and
4. determine the difference in the level of maintenance of professional ethics as perceived by the academic and non-academic university staff.

Research Questions

1. What is the assessment level of the stakeholders on maintenance of professional ethics in the Nigerian Universities?
2. What are the stakeholders' perceived loopholes in the maintenance process of professional ethics in the Nigerian Universities System?
3. What are the best practices in the maintenance of professional ethics in the university system as suggested by stakeholders?

Hypothesis

There is no significant difference in the academic and non-academic university staff's assessment of the maintenance of professional ethics in the Nigerian Universities System.

METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted in this study was a descriptive survey. The population for the study consisted of both academic and non-academic staffs from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. A total of 250 staffs (150 academic staff and 100 non-academic staff) constituted the sample size for the study. Purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting the staffs from five faculties (Arts, Science, Education, Administration, and Social Sciences) because of the strong affiliation to Education than other faculties in the University. From the five faculties, purposeful sampling technique was employed in selecting both academic and non-academic staff in such a way that, the minimum qualification for non-teaching staff must be at least first degree in Education while for Academics, the minimum qualification must be Ph.D in Education related courses. An instrument titled: Professional Ethics Questionnaire (PEQ) developed by the researchers was used for the study. This instrument has four sections. Section A was design to collect data on Demographic variables of both academic and non-teaching staffs. Section B consisted of 12 items that elicited information on stakeholders' enforcement of professional ethics, the scale ranges from S.A to S.D. The highest score is 48 points and the lowest is 12 points. Section C has 10 items on Stakeholders perceived loopholes in the enforcement process of professional ethics, it also has four scales ranging from S.A to S.D. The highest point is 40 points and the lowest is 10 points. Section D had 10 items that elicited information on the best practices in the maintenance of professional ethics. It equally has four scales ranges from S.A to S.D. The instrument was validated using Cronbach alpha method with the reliability coefficient of 0.87. The data collected were scored and analyzed with the use of mean, standard deviation and t-test statistics.

RESULTS

Research Question 1

What is the assessment level of the stakeholders on maintenance of professional ethics in the Nigerian Universities?

To answer this question, stakeholders' (academic & non-teaching staffs) responses to section B of PEQ were scored based on the items in the questionnaire as rated by the investigators. The individual respective scores were summed up to build their level of enforcement of professional ethics. The mean and standard score of the group score were 27.56 and 9.47 respectively. Scores below the group mean score were considered as having a low level of maintenance of professional ethics.

Scores within the mean score and one standard deviation above the mean score (i.e. 27.56-37.03) were considered as moderate level of maintenance of professional ethics while those with scores of 38 and above were considered as high level of maintenance of professional ethics. The result is presented in table 2 below.

Table 1: Stakeholders' level of enforcement of professional ethics

Level	Frequency	Percent
High	54	21.6
Moderate	122	48.8
Low	74	29.6
Total	250	100.0

Table 1 showed that 21.6% of the stakeholders had high level of maintenance of professional ethics. Also, 48.8% of the stakeholders have moderate level while 29.6% of the stakeholders were found to have low level of maintenance of professional ethics.

There is an indication from this result that majority of the stakeholders that participated in the study demonstrated moderate level of maintenance of professional ethics.

Research Question 2

What are the stakeholders' perceived loopholes in the maintenance process of professional ethics in the Nigerian Universities System?

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of stakeholders' perceived loopholes in the enforcement of professional ethics

Loopholes	Stakeholders	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Genetic Factor	Academic staff	150	3.19	.621
	Non-academic staff	100	2.59	.842
Environmental Milieu	Academic staff	150	3.29	.832
	Non-academic staff	100	3.01	.882
Educational Attainment	Academic staff	150	3.09	.934
	Non-academic staff	100	3.65	.479
Cultural Context	Academic staff	150	3.15	.792
	Non-academic staff	100	3.03	.958
Political Undertone	Academic staff	150	3.43	.754
	Non-academic staff	100	3.39	.815
Religious Affiliation	Academic staff	150	3.61	.792
	Non-academic staff	100	3.64	.644
Attitudinal Inclination	Academic staff	150	3.41	.891
	Non-academic staff	100	3.29	.891
Government in Power	Academic staff	150	3.19	.854
	Non-academic staff	100	3.24	.818
Code of Conduct	Academic staff	150	3.35	.734
	Non-academic staff	100	3.10	1.020
Value System	Academic staff	150	3.54	.720
	Non-academic staff	100	3.32	.790

Table 2 depicted the stakeholders' perceived loopholes in the maintenance process of professional ethics in the Nigerian Universities System. The most perceived loopholes in the maintenance process of professional ethics as revealed by the Academic staff were religious affiliation (M=3.61, S.D=0.792), value system (M=3.54, S.D=0.720), Political undertone (M=3.43, S.D=0.754), Attitudinal inclination (M=3.41, S.D=.891) and Code of conduct (M=3.35, S.D=0.734). Likewise, the most perceived loopholes in the maintenance process of professional ethics as revealed by the Non-teaching staff were Educational attainment (M=3.65, S. D=0.479), Religious affiliation (M=3.64, S.D=0.644), Political undertone (M=3.39, S.D=0.815), Value system (M=3.32, S.D=0.790) and Attitudinal inclination (M=3.29, S.D=0.891). Similarly, it suggests that religious affiliations depict a major perceived loophole in the maintenance process of professional ethics in the Nigerian Universities System.

Research Question 3

What are the best practices in the maintenance of professional ethics in the university system as suggested by stakeholders?

Fig 2: Descriptive Statistics of best practices in the maintenance of professional ethics

Best Practices	Stakeholders	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emphasis on cooperation	Academic staff	150	3.83	.565
	Non-academic staff	100	3.64	.595
Need for public policy	Academic staff	150	3.57	.717
	Non-academic staff	100	3.55	.730
Sense of universality	Academic staff	150	3.49	.833
	Non-academic staff	100	3.65	.520
Practice of universal norms	Academic staff	150	3.49	.740
	Non-academic staff	100	3.41	.780
Cultural Relativism	Academic staff	150	3.71	.595
	Non-academic staff	100	3.71	.624
Need for Ethical conduct	Academic staff	150	3.45	.782
	Non-academic staff	100	3.51	.689
Enforcement of Code of Conduct	Academic staff	150	3.81	.501
	Non-academic staff	100	3.65	.672
Limiting membership	Academic staff	150	3.41	.779
	Non-academic staff	100	3.47	.784
Licensing members	Academic staff	150	3.68	.763
	Non-academic staff	100	3.74	.463
Requiring continued education	Academic staff	150	3.48	.895
	Non-academic staff	100	3.31	.895

Table 3 depicted the stakeholders’ best practices in the maintenance of professional ethics in the university system. The high rank best practices in the maintenance of professional ethics as revealed by the Academic staff were Emphasis on cooperation (M=3.83, S.D=0.565), Enforcement of code of conduct (M=3.81, S.D=0.501), Cultural Relativism (M=3.71, S.D=0.595), Licensing members (M=3.68, S.D=0.763) and Need for public policy (M=3.57, S.D=0.717). Likewise, the high rank best practices in the maintenance of professional ethics as revealed by the Non-academic staff were Licensing members (M=3.74, S.D=0.463), Cultural relativism (M=3.71, S.D=0.624), Enforcement of code and conduct (M=3.65, S.D=0.672), Sense of universality (M=3.65, S.D=0.520) and Emphasis on cooperation (M=3.64, S.D=0.595). Similarly, it suggests that Enforcement of code and conduct depict academic and non-academic staff best practices in the maintenance of professional ethics in the Nigerian University System.

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference in the academic and non-academic staff assessment of the maintenance of professional ethics in the Nigerian Universities system

Table 4: t-test summary table showing the difference in the academic and non-academic staff assessment of the enforcement of professional ethics

Stakeholders	N	Mean	Std Deviation	df	t	P
Academic staff	150	27.65	9.012	248	.191	.849
Non-academic staff	100	27.42	10.154			

As revealed in Table 4, the t-value 0.191 was obtained with the p-value 0.849. Since the p-value is greater than 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is retained. Thus, there is no significant difference in the academic and non-academic staff assessment of the maintenance of professional ethics ($t_{(248)} = 0.191$; $p > 0.05$).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In assessing stakeholders level of maintenance of professional ethics in the Nigerian Universities, it was discovered that majority of the stakeholders demonstrated moderate level of maintenance of professional ethics. This could be in connection with the observation of Gilman (2005) that to demonstrate high level of ethic maintenance process, stakeholders should be knowledgeable and be skillful of the ethics of the profession. Those who are knowledgeable of the ethic code and precedents are always sensitive to the process of enforcing it. Also, this is in line with the opinion of Ikechi and Akanwa (2012) that most of the unethical practices in the Nigerian education sector would have been nonexistent, if stakeholders such as teachers had fully keyed in to their code of conduct.

Furthermore, stakeholders' perceived loopholes in the maintenance process of professional ethics in the Nigerian Universities System, was examined. It was discovered that religious affiliations depict a major perceived loophole in the maintenance process of professional ethics in the Nigerian Universities System. This is in line with the view of Iacovino (2002). It is expected of religion to promote and maintain ethical values. The implication of this result where religion shows a major loophole in the maintenance of professional ethic is that not all religious persons can be saddle with the responsibilities of maintenance of professional ethic. Also, the result showed that education portrays a loophole in the maintenance of professional ethic. This could not be only in lack of adequate level of education but could as well be as a result of overconfidence in the level of educational exposure because as unethical behaviour is being observed in the people of low level of education (especially non-teaching staff) likewise it is being observed among the high level of education (academic staff of high rank).

More so, considering the stakeholders' best practices in the maintenance of professional ethics in the university system, it was revealed that enforcement of code and conduct depict academic and non-teaching staff best practices in the maintenance of professional ethics in the Nigerian University System. This is supported by Vanclay, Baines and Taylor (2013) as well as Bhatia and Bhatia (2015) who were of the view that Unethical behaviour thrives in darkness and can only exist when ethical leaders remain bystanders in the face of evil. Enamiroro and Okpilike, (2012) recommended

provision of ethic training lessons for both staff and students, appointment of ethic specialists as school managers, preparation and utilization of formal code of ethic in schools for staff and student, and whistle blowing that is reporting unethical school practices to outside authorities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concluded that ethical conduct has not been given proper attention by all the stakeholders in the Nigerian education sector. The occurrence of unethical issues is the fault of all the stakeholders. Enforcement of code and conduct will go along with maintenance of professional ethics in the Nigerian educational institution. It is therefore recommended that government should enforce strict adherence or compliance to professional ethics. Also, school management should not pardon anyone who is guilty of flaunting the ethics of his/her profession. This is in a bid to ensure that the tertiary education goals in Nigeria are achieved. Code interpretation must be consistent and fair. Those involved in the process must be both knowledgeable of the code and precedents, as well as sensitive to the fact that leaders and administrators have an obligation to do their jobs.

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