

## **The Role of Tertiary Institutions in Safeguarding Ethical Standards: The UTECH Experience**

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### **Overview**

Tertiary education institutions play a critical role in supporting knowledge-driven growth and development and the construction of democratic, socially cohesive societies (Harrison and Huntington, 2000). The norms, values, attitudes, and ethics that tertiary institutions impart to students form the bedrock of the social capital required for building healthy civil societies and cohesive cultures, the very backbone of good governance and democratic political systems (Inglehart, 2000). Tertiary education has many purposes beyond the acquisition of concrete skills in preparation for the world of work. It also involves developing a person's ability to reason systematically about critical questions and issues, to place facts in a broader context, to consider the moral implications of actions and choices, to communicate knowledge and questions effectively, and to nurture habits that promote lifelong-learning behaviours outside the formal academic setting (Gardener, 2002).

Producing ethically grounded graduates and by extension safeguarding ethical standards is a challenge faced by most, if not all, tertiary academic institutions. There is no quick fix or broad brush approach to addressing such challenges. Moral and ethical practices of students, like other citizens, are influenced not only by their personal experiences but equally by spiritual beliefs/outlook, social norms/practices and family values. The Lawrence Kohlberg's model of moral development outlines six key concepts and stages of ethical development from childhood to adulthood (Kohlberg, 1986). As academics we must understand and aim to tap into as we plan our next move in safeguarding ethical standards. The six stages include:

#### **Pre-conventional morality- Children:**

- Stage 1: Obedience and punishment orientation
- Stage 2: Self Interest

#### **Conventional Morality- Adolescent stage:**

- Stage 3: Social conformity orientation
- Stage 4: Law and order orientation

#### **Post-conventional Morality- Adults:**

- Stage 5: Social contract orientation
- Stage 6: Universal ethics

Generally, university students are at the conventional morality development stage. As such, institutional interventions and strategies to address ethics and morality should be centred on those theoretical frameworks. One must be very clear and be able to differentiate between what is ethical and what is acceptable. Often times, the two are confused and misused interchangeably. A practice accepted by society or within a social construct such as “law” does not always constitute an ethical practice. Equally, what is considered ethical/cultural practice in one domain is not the same in another. In order for an academic institution to produce ethically grounded graduates it must first determine root causes, and devise intervention methods needed to influence the ethical development of students. Sims (1994) reported that most tertiary business students acting dishonestly in school also behave dishonestly in the work place. Therefore a breakdown in moral practices at the tertiary level is perpetuated further in everyday/business practice. Hanson and Moore (2013) reported that American university students are increasingly acting in self-interest, making decisions that are ethically incompatible with traditional aspects of teamwork, service and higher-order ethical conduct. As such I am of the view that tertiary institutions should aim to move students from rule-based behaviour and serving self-interest to recognition of group and community responsibilities. These are key attributes of an ethically grounded citizen. It is a known fact that students, current and past, enter tertiary academic institutions with their own concepts of ethics, varying views on morality and outlook on life itself. Students and staff, like other citizens, are influenced by spiritual practices, social norms and personal interactions. Despite this, however, the university must hold ethical conduct and moral standards in high regard and aim to train graduates to meet the highest ethical standards. Instilling principles of respect, justice, community service and beneficence in our students and staff is an ongoing battle we cannot afford to lose. However, this cannot be achieved without realising and identifying past and present challenges.

### **Challenges Faced and Measures Implemented by UTech, Jamaica**

Our students are from several different cultural backgrounds and social constructs, have individual religious beliefs and practices, at different stages of moral and cognitive development, have unique moral values, different family structure and different personal

experiences. This forms the fundamental challenge in addressing issues of ethics, morality and values at the university level. Additionally, with over 70 % of the academic programmes offered at the institution being professionally driven, students are required fit within the professional requirements and adhere to such code of ethical conduct. The institution is equally responsible to ensure that these professional requirements are included in the training. With this in mind, our students must at the onset appreciate the standards, principles and practices within each profession. Not only are they required to make decisions based on their moral values, but also they must be in accordance with the profession's code of ethics and ethical conduct. One approach utilised by the College of Health Sciences is to include a mandatory psychometric assessment of Pharmacy and Nursing student applicants to ensure alignment with the profession. This process seeks to identify students with the required traits, values, ethics and competencies required by the profession. As academics we must also recognise the impact of spiritual beliefs, cultural interactions and life experiences on students' ideas of morality and ethics.

In a bid to train graduates with high ethical and moral values and thereby fulfilling its mission UTech, Jamaica embarked on several activities to prevent ethical misconduct, improve student values and respond to issues of academic misconduct. This led to the development of several policies, including the Student Code of Ethics Policy, Code of Ethical Conduct for staff, the Research Policy and Guidelines, The Publication Policy, Research Ethics Policy (human and animal subjects) and establishment of the University Research Ethics Committee. Additionally professional ethics, ethics and jurisprudence are incorporated in the curriculum for all courses of study offered by the institution. Research ethics is further grounded in the Research Methods module, a module required by all undergraduate and postgraduate students. Regulation 5 Statute XIII provides oversight on the conditions and procedures governing academic misconduct in relation to breaches in academic dishonesty, fraud or unethical behaviour or conduct (UTech Undergraduate Student Handbook, 2013). Offences are classified as Gross and Major. Students found to be in breach of the university's and professional codes of ethics can be suspended for up to 1 academic year or face expulsion from the university. Additionally, students in training found to be in breach of the ethical code of conduct are barred from entering some professions. Students are sensitised on the ethical codes of conduct of the university during orientation and on the requirements of the profession throughout the training process.

Plagiarism, a topic of extensive debate, was recently incorporated into the university's policies with clear guidelines on the level of acceptance. Discussions are underway for the mandatory inclusion of the turn-it-in score for all undergraduate and graduate non-examination assessment pieces. Additionally, the institution will in the near future require electronic submission of assessment pieces, which would allow for faster and more reliable valuations. Students found guilty of plagiarism can face suspension for up to 1 academic year and be required to redo the assessment piece. Plagiarism is considered a major offence. If the act is repeated, the student is expelled.

Ethics in research is considered to be a major priority of the university. With over 400 undergraduate and graduate projects undertaken each academic year an efficient yet robust mechanism for ethical review and approval was established and operationalised in 2012. All projects involving human or animal subjects, posing potential risk to the environment, or using hazardous materials are required to obtain approval from the university committee. The University Research Ethics committee has overall responsibility for granting approval for ethics while 8 sub-committees were established (one in College/Faculty Committees) to grant permission to exempt status projects and projects considered as minimal risk. These projects are recommended by the college/faculty committee chair who serves as the college/faculty representative on the university's committee. In 2004, the university established the publication policy which provides oversight and guidelines on the ethical requirements and responsibilities of authors for publication of manuscripts, books, technical reports and monographs.

### **Promoting Integrity in Research and Publication**

As members of the academic community, staff and students have a responsibility to abide by ethical principles regarding academic freedom, intellectual integrity, and the fair and respectful treatment of others. Researchers must acknowledge the source(s) of their data and accurately describe the method by which their data was gathered (UTech Research Policy and Guidelines, 2004). Moreover, the fabrication or falsification of data or results constitutes a violation of ethical standards (CSEPP, 1995). Both of these actions interfere with the search for knowledge and truth and undermine trust both within and outside the academic community. In a bid to maintain integrity, ethics and excellence in research, the University of Technology, Jamaica embarked on the development of a robust research policy to guide academic and professional decisions whilst making room for academic freedom (UTech

Research Policy and Guidelines, 2004). As such, the Research Committee, a Committee of the University's Academic Board, proposed a set of guidelines to ensure responsible research practice among its staff and students. This policy provided;

- Guidelines for ensuring the integrity of research activity in the University;
- Opportunities for staff and students to develop research according to acceptable national and international standards;
- A vehicle for the administration of research grants and research consultancies;
- Opportunities to protect the inventions and intellectual property resulting from University-sponsored research;
- To ensure the safety and well-being of research staff, human and animal subjects and experiments;
- To facilitate the development of teaching, critical enquiry and the furtherance of knowledge through research and the provision of research infrastructure.

Researchers in the University must therefore demonstrate integrity, honesty and professionalism in the conduct of their research. The requirement of academic integrity in research includes areas involving handling of data; publications (including the avoidance of plagiarism); conflicts of interest and misuse or misapplication of research funds. Any breach of these requirements results in the penalties sanctioned by the University Ordinances (UTech Research Policy and Guidelines, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

It is very evident that socialisation of staff and students to ethical principles and requirements needs to be more explicit and the mechanisms of social control within the academic profession need to be strengthened in order to improve adherence to ethical principles. Additionally, students must be made aware of the institutions' expectations as well as the consequences of the failing to meet those expectations. In order for tertiary institutions to safeguard ethical standards they should seek to incorporate the recommendations as outlined by Braxton and Bayer (1999) which suggests that staff and administrators should better articulate and codify the norms of professional behaviour; more explicitly socialise graduate students about the profession and its ethical obligations; increasingly provide incentives for teaching [and research] behaviour that is consistent with the standards of the profession; and when necessary, impose sanctions for violations of those standards.

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