

## Tackling cheating scourge in varsities

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University students during a past examination. FILE PHOTO | NMG

In continuation of the Business Talk miniseries on Kenyan education, we delve into solutions to the endemic scourge of cheating in Kenyan universities.

Business Talk highlighted the prevalence, statistics, and causes of cheating at the university level in the June 7 edition whereby a staggering 82 per cent of Kenyan public university students admit to cheating.

One of the most dismal examples of cheating revolves around master's degree theses and projects. Graduate students should ideally develop a research study to solve an industry or theoretical problem. Graduate-level projects help prepare students for future problem solving when they become industry executives in the future.

Sadly, cheating permeates even these would-be seminal momentous life-changing projects and we instead get more half-baked post-graduates. Some universities employ no reasonable method to crack down on master's project or even PhD dissertation cheating.

Personally, I have interviewed PhD holder applicants with 100 per cent plagiarised dissertations from various institutions.

Other universities run all homework, projects, and dissertations through anti-plagiarism software. However, such web programmes only catch cheating against published content on the Internet. The software cannot detect if the master's student pays a third-party to write their project for them. I have individually denied master's students graduating for not knowing their own research questions or faking survey completions. An informal Kenyan survey this year showed an estimated 90 per cent of master's students paid third parties to write their theses. Obtaining assistance or tutoring on research methods or data collection is not cheating. But when third parties actually write sections or all of a master's project for the student, that crosses the ethical boundary. A formalised study specifically on master's project cheating in Kenya will commence in the fourth quarter this year.

Catching cheaters who do not write their own dissertations are harder to catch than simple plagiarisers. But tightening down on processes does help. When students are confused about instructions or are not taught how to complete a task, they turn to cheating more often. Graduate-level projects are often quintessential sources of confusion.

Universities and supervisors frequently avoid instructive teaching hoping instead that students will research and figure it out techniques and approaches on their own. Unfortunately, such pedagogy leads to mass cheating.

Master's students should not only be taught the page limits, margin sizes, and sections of a research project but should also be taught what types of problems can be solved through rigorous research, how to formulate research questions, how do hypotheses differ from research questions, how to input survey data into statistical software, and how to use the software.

Many master's classes require students to do "journal critiques" whereby students must review journal articles and provide their opinions on the research presented. Sadly, these assignments rarely come with any instructive guidance on how to conduct research, how to read the research, or how to do proper quantitative and qualitative analysis. So how on earth can we expect our Kenyan graduate students to critique or understand high-end research appearing in top academic journals if we do not help them decipher and demystify research itself? University instruction should not be a process of the blind leading the blind or releasing students to roam free in a laissez-faire approach with no proper instruction.

Often business statistics classes in Kenya make master's students memorise formulas utilised in the pre-computer era. This approach proves illogical. We must teach our Kenyan graduate students how to operate the world's cutting-edge statistical software.

When using Google Scholar or other research databases, do we make students learn the proprietary algorithms that underpin using search engines? Of course not.

Then why only teach graduate students basic formulas that alone cannot do the advanced structured equation modelling needed in quantitative analysis and is impossible to do by hand without modern software? When Kenyan business statistics courses incorporate popular statistics software SPSS into the curriculum, it is often only a “familiarisation” and not instructive on how to maximise the software to perform even simple variance components, multiple regressions, or correlations. Only retrieving descriptive statistics on the average response per question in a survey is secondary school analysis and not worthy of a master’s project.

Popular statistics software SPSS cannot even do structured equation modelling, but the top research journals in the world often require such analysis. We must go above and beyond in our classroom and supervisory instruction if we want to turn Kenya into a research hub.

In addition to proper instruction, so master’s students feel confident enough to do their own research, other techniques must be implemented to crack down on graduate students hiring third parties to write their theses for them. Please read Business Talk next week on Thursday for more in-depth methods to eliminate this kind of cheating.