

## An Evaluation of Academic Integrity and Sustainable Quality Education in Higher Learning Institutions in Kenya: Students' Perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

Education has been recognized globally as an essential weapon for attaining economic, social, and political development in any nation. Education is a fundamental tool in achieving sustainable development. Academic integrity is the act of honesty, trust, and responsibility that the academic community exhibits. Institutions of higher learning embrace an eminent institutional culture by providing quality assurance structures that take cognizance of the inputs, processes, and outputs of the entire learning process nurturing academic integrity. This is because academic integrity gives students and faculty the flexibility to develop new ideas, knowledge, and creative works while also appreciating and acknowledging others' efforts. This paper explored the question of academic integrity in the context of sustainable development in universities in Kenya. Mixed research approach and the cross-sectional design were adopted. A total of 550 respondents were approached for the study. The authors adopted primary and secondary data collection tools to collect data from undergraduate and postgraduate students using simple random sampling. They specifically analysed documents and collected primary data on forms of academic integrity violation, ways of engaging in academic violations, punishment, and preventive strategies for academic violations. Well-defined strategies, information literacy programmes, ethical policies, good leadership, proper guidelines, mentorship, customized technology, and authentic assessment are seen to be catalysts for promoting academic integrity. While lack of proper strategies, weak policies, fear of failure, and insufficient mentorship inhibit academic integrity standards and practices which negatively influence the acquisition of relevant soft and hard skills needed in the industry. The authors developed an academic integrity framework for consideration by universities in Kenya and beyond. These findings may be used to support relevant policy development in academic institutions. Universities may also benefit by implementing or adapting the proposed academic integrity framework.

**Keywords:** Academic Integrity, Kenya, Sustainable Development, Universities, Violations.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Education is at the frontline of any development from primary school to tertiary education and lifelong learning. UNESCO defines Education for Sustainable Development as a source of empowerment for the learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society, for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2018). The investment in higher education is a crucial aspect in the development of a culture of sustainability since the organizations where there is the greatest effort in higher education have high academic knowledge and research interest and willingness to adopt and research advancements, including the ones related to SDGs (Rosati & Faria, 2019).

Integrity plays a crucial role when discussing sustainable development. This paper is anchored on SDG no. 4 'to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. Therefore, the mindset for quality education must be formed both amongst students and academic staff (Filho et al., 2019). Development of a sustainable academic culture can be realized through different activities carried out on campus including teaching, learning, research and innovation, assessment, and community outreach which have substantial impact to the economy and the society at large (Findler et al., 2019).

Kerry (2015) pointed out that higher education institutions have a particular responsibility to form future professionals and implement knowledge and ideas. There is no doubt that universities have considered sustainability as part of their responsibilities. The capacity of higher education institutions to influence the transformation to a more sustainable society is tremendous. By considering academic integrity principles in studies and research programs, university staff and students are actively working towards a sustainable world (UNESCO, 2020).

Although the massification of higher education is a necessary and important part of the global knowledge economy, it has a significant impact on its quality (Altbach, 2016). In some places, quality among faculty and students is decreasing dramatically. Some institutions have failed under global pressure and are becoming more prone to a lack of academic integrity (Heyneman, 2013). Ramdani (2018) conceived integrity as the magnitude at which an individual acts and thinks morally and honestly. In an education set up academic integrity is key in promoting sustainable development. Academic integrity refers to the individual's commitment to positive values which will assist him or her behave, conduct, and conform to acceptable standard towards creating a viable academic environment. Academic integrity has a lot of implications on the development of higher education institutions. Robert and Hai-Jew (2009) argued that with the help of academic integrity, learners in higher education institutions can improve their self-identity and assist in attaining the mission of academic institutions hence contributing towards sustainable development in a nation.

It is crucial that Higher Learning Institutions globally, regionally, and locally promote academic integrity initiatives through institutional policy and practice (Morris, 2018). Denisova-Schmidt (2023) indicates that, an experiment conducted at a UK university suggests that the willingness of undergraduate students to engage in academic misconduct strongly correlates to the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) ranking of their home countries. According to Birks et al. (2020), Grira & Jaeck (2019) and Harper et al. (2020), academic integrity has become rampant and increased over time.

Barbaranelli et al. (2018) and Bashir & Bala (2018) assert that academic dishonesty is a multicultural universal phenomenon. In India, for example Stearns (2001) note that over 20% of 1,369 research participants agreed to academic dishonesty. A study conducted in Australia examined 150,000 students over eight years and found that 65% of the students reported academic dishonesty in at least one of the study's parameters (Duff et al., 2006). Equally, another study conducted in Romani found that 95% of the students reported unbecoming academic behaviour (Ives et al., 2017).

Higher learning institutions have a great responsibility to form future sustainability leaders and support the ambitious SDGs targets implementation. Kudeikina et al. (2022) assert that education should not be seen as an end in itself. Certain quality requirements and standards should be respected in the educational process, one of them being academic integrity. Moris and Carroll (2016) pointed out that when universities develop holistic institutional policies on integrity and implement them, this is reflected in the ethical behaviour of students because these students see their teachers or lecturers as their role model and will be always ready to emulate good virtues and ethical behaviour from them. Ethical behaviour is paramount for sustainable development. Therefore, academic misconduct is to be firmly condemned both at educational institutions and in society. This kind of misconduct represents a phenomenon leading to several threats, and it can be interpreted as an intellectual property theft, which compromises the quality of education, thereby reducing a state's capacity for sustainable development, and undermining confidence in higher learning institutions and persons who have committed misconduct, adversely affecting society in general.

According to Mahamud and Ali (2021) universities face numerous challenges related to breaches in student academic integrity, whether unintentional or deliberate. Mohamedbhai (2023) alludes that corruption in African countries affects various sectors of society – government, business, religion, health, and police – and higher education is no exception. He continues to say that a survey of the situation in different universities in Africa shows that academic dishonesty is widespread in Africa, thus threatening the credibility of higher education in the region. Such higher education institutions play a vital role in providing a nation with the required skilled manpower, needed to foster sustainable development. As a transformational agent, higher education institutions have a tremendous impact on students' habits and contributions to a prosperous society. Society expects that higher learning institutions release to the market quality graduates that shall contribute significantly to sustainability. For these higher education institutions to respond positively towards meeting the needs of society, ethical behaviour of various actors is crucial. It is beyond argument that education is the cornerstone of sustainable development of any society. The more educated society and its individual members are, the more capable the country and its economy, security, and technology systems are of giving a targeted response to challenges of today's world. To achieve this, universities in Kenya and beyond would need to develop a clear institutional strategy for promoting academic integrity.

The main purpose of the study was to establish students' perception of academic integrity. The specific objectives were to: find out the level of awareness of the term academic integrity; examine why students commit academic integrity violations; assess how universities punish students who violate academic integrity; and to design and develop an academic integrity framework to reduce academic integrity violations among students in universities.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Mixed research approach was used. According to Creswell (2014), this is an approach to inquiry that combines both qualitative and quantitative forms. The study adopted cross sectional design in which data was collected at a particular point in time in the months of April to September 2022. The researchers carried out a survey. Orodho (2009) states that survey is the most frequently used method for collecting information about people's attitudes, opinions, and habits, among other social issues. It involves random selection of research subjects, getting their views and generalizing the findings to the entire population. The researchers targeted all undergraduate and postgraduate students in universities in Kenya from whom 550 responded using a simple random sampling technique where all universities were given equal chances of participation.

Data was collected from primary sources using an online structured questionnaire. The questionnaire contained both open and closed ended questions with some questions in a three-point Likert scale format where 3=agree, 2=disagree, 1=neutral while other questions had the options of yes or no for the answers. Open ended questions were used to collect qualitative data to assist in explanations. The online questionnaire was developed using the google forms application where instant data from respondents was analyzed.

The objectives of the study were shared with the respondents via a phone call while assuring them of the confidentiality of the data collected. Some of the respondents took longer than expected to respond to the questionnaires. Although there were several follow-up reminders, other respondents did not completely respond to the questionnaire. The findings have been presented descriptively using narratives, figures, and percentages.

### Ethical Considerations

The study received ethics approval from The Kenyan Quality Assurance Executive peer review committee. *See attached letter of invitation in the list of appendices.* Informed consent was collected prior to the survey and interviews. *See attached questionnaire in the list of appendices.* All data were anonymized by using a number system.

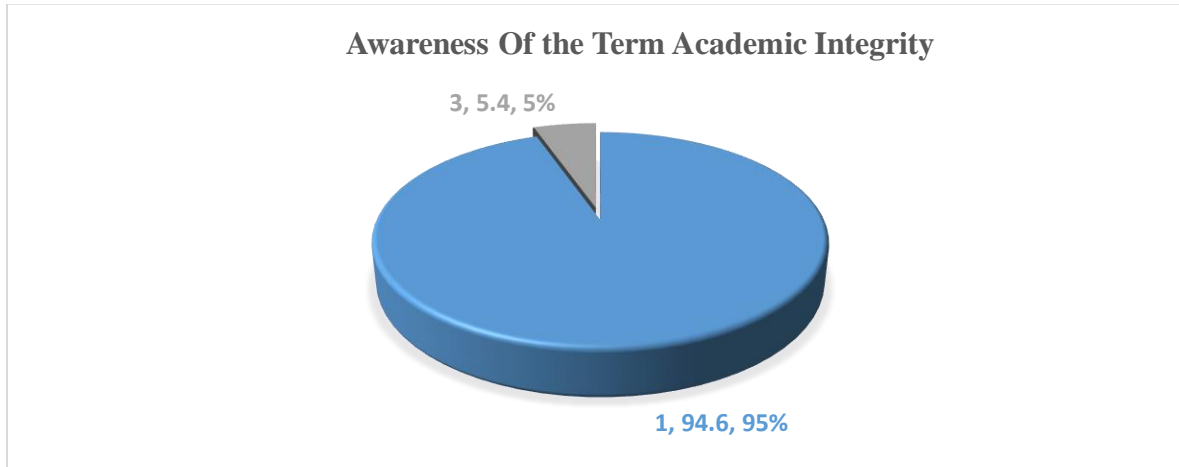
## III. RESULTS

A total of five hundred and fifty (550) respondents participated corresponding to (74.3%) response rate. Demographic analysis indicates that (49.5%) of the respondents were male while (42.2%) were female and (8.3%) preferred not to indicate their gender, this shows that most respondents were male. Analysis by category of the University indicates that majority (80.9%) of the respondents were from public universities, a few (10%) were from private universities, a very small number of (5.5%) from public and (3.6%) private university colleges respectively. This also reveals that although all respondents had been given equal opportunity very few from each private universities filled the questionnaire. Further analysis done by level of study indicates that (85.5%) respondents were undergraduates while (14.5%) were postgraduate. Regarding the year of study (25.5%) were in fourth year, (17.3%) in third year, (30.9%) in second year and (26.4%) in first year. This was a good representation of respondents in terms of years of study.

### Level of Awareness of Academic Integrity

It was interesting to learn that students are aware of academic integrity violations as displayed in figure 1 below. The study also revealed that (94.5%) of the respondents were aware that some students in the university had violated academic integrity while (4.5%) were not aware. This may be an indicator that academic misconduct is not anew thing in the university and could even be something they transited with from high schools.

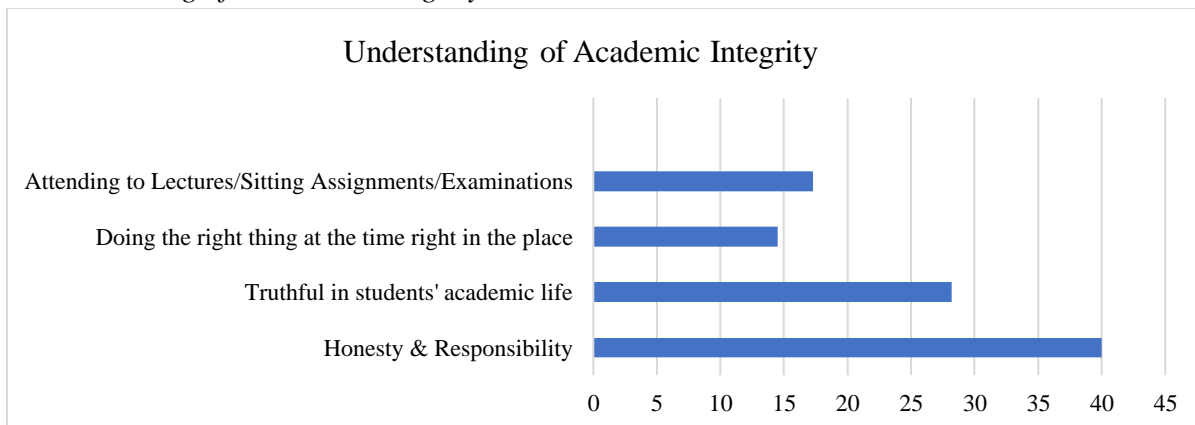
**Figure 1:**  
*Awareness of the Term Academic Integrity*



### Students' Understanding of Academic Integrity

The researchers wanted to find out the students' understanding if academic integrity and what they think it involved. The study revealed that students understand academic integrity as the use, generation, and communication of information in an ethical, honest and responsible manner (40%), being truthful in student academic life and work (28.2%), doing the right thing at the right time in the right place as a student (14.5%), attending all lectures, doing all assignments and sitting for examinations as per the university rules and regulations (17.3%). It is an indication that this vice is known to students and its part of what they engage in their university life.

**Figure 2:**  
*Understanding of Academic Integrity*



### Academic Integrity Violations

Having established students understanding of academic integrity the study sort to unearth the rampant academic integrity violations among students. Students were expected to indicate the academic violations that they knew and to rate them. The results show that cheating in CATs, assignments, and examinations was the most rampant (95.5%), this was followed by plagiarism (78.2%), facilitating academic misconduct that is helping another student to do assignments or exams (69.1%), falsification that is the manipulation of data (47.3%) and fabrication that is making up of data (37.3%), buying of research projects and thesis (2.7%) was the list rampant. The above points to major concerns in the quality of teaching, learning and assessments. We have more than five (5) forms of academic violations among university students and all at above 35% which is quite high hence rampant.

**Table 1:**

*Components of Academic Integrity Violations*

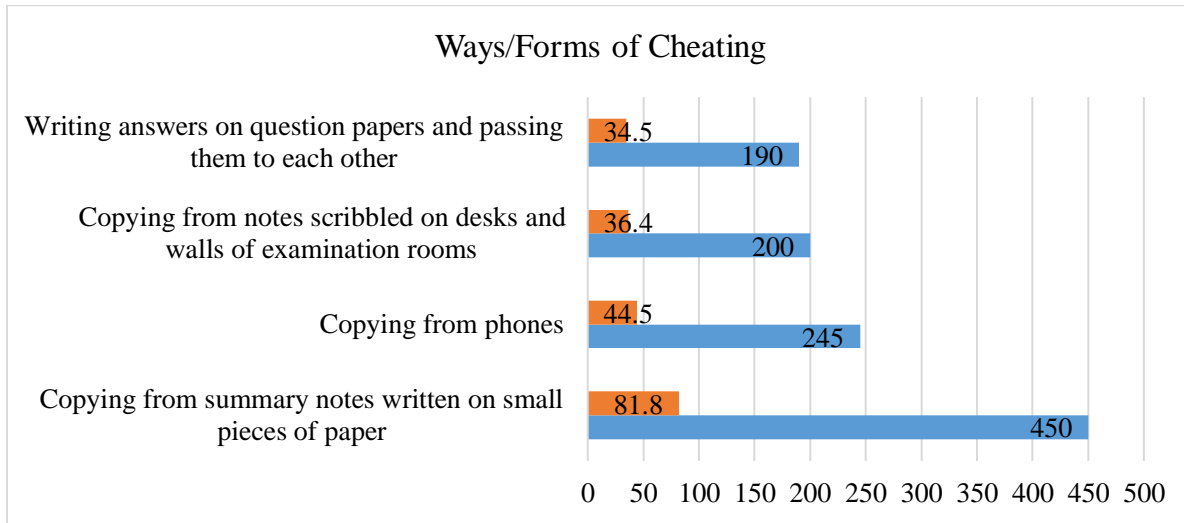
S. No.	Academic Integrity Violations	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Cheating in CATs/Assignments/Examinations	525	95.5%
2.	Plagiarism	430	78.2%
3.	Facilitating academic misconduct	380	69.1%
4.	Falsification	260	47.3%
5.	Fabrication	205	37.3%
6.	Buying of research projects and thesis	15	2.7%

### Cheating in Examinations

A specific question was posed to the respondents regarding how students cheat during examinations. This question was important because the conduct of examinations in any institution is a measure of integrity. The study revealed that students cheat in the following ways as shown in Figure 3. This is an indication that copying from small papers also known as “mwakenya” is the leading form of cheating at 81.8%, followed by use of mobile phones at 44.5%, copying scribbled desks and walls in the examination rooms at 36.4% and passing of answers written on question papers at 34.5%. It means that universities should invest in smart classrooms to support with security devices like cameras to support in invigilation since it means that students are still able to copy despite having invigilators. Examination rules and regulations should also be enhanced by preventing students from accessing the examination rooms with phones. Sitting arrangements should also be looked at to provide enough space to avoid passing or exchange of examination papers

**Figure 3.**

*Forms of Cheating in Examinations*



**Reasons Students Commit Academic Violations**

Respondents listed both direct and indirect reasons why they commit academic violations. Direct reasons were touching on the students such as fear of or to avoid failure, to avoid taking supplementary, laziness, failure to adequately revise and prepare for examinations due to poor time management, lack of enough preparation in terms of teaching; lack of content, inadequacy in terms of syllabus coverage due to absenteeism by either the students or the lecturers, desire to pass examinations and get good grades, fear of examinations, lack of self-love, lack of believing in themselves and some intentionally refuse to study because they know they won't be caught, lack of knowledge, failure in commitment to their academic work, not well prepared with all the responsibilities that comes with the academic journey, examinations set are difficult, seeing others violating academic integrity and getting away with it is a motivation, focus on easy luxurious life at the expense of studies, sometimes academic life gets stressful, students have to find upkeep money for themselves, pay rent, and worst they cannot afford a 2 square meal per day, absconding of lectures, ignorance of the consequences of cheating in examinations and *“Too many things to do within a short time. Some students have to fend for themselves, at the same time attending classes, group discussions, assignments as well as study. In most cases, by the time examinations are here, students are most likely not well prepared. For example, during my fourth year, in a span of about 2 months we had CATs to do, too many assignments and discussions, do our research proposals and 2 weeks for exams, this was mostly overwhelming. It would have been nice if there could have been specific dates and a timetable to do CATs instead of lecturers choosing their own dates. Also, I'd consider the learning materials blunt. Lecturers should include links on YouTube videos and websites that are helpful, especially for complex topics. For example, I had friends undertaking statistics and they would complain all the time coz they wouldn't understand the notes provided by the lecturer.”* It is a "Way out for them from the tiring education system."

The indirect reasons were not to disappoint those who 'sent' them to school. Due to peer pressure, high expectations from family, friends, and society to have good grades and not skills. Lecturers sometimes insist on submitting typed assignments and some students cannot afford that.

### **Universities Punishment to Students Who Violate Academic Integrity**

Curtis and Clare (2017) argued that awareness of penalties against dishonest acts will stimulate students to act in an ethical manner and shun dishonest acts. It will control students' cheating or engaging in other dishonest acts and make students be just and fair in their dealings. When asked to select how students are punished upon violating academic integrity, the study revealed the following: suspension (78.2%), cancellation of examination results (44.5%), expulsion (31.8%), and warning (24.5%). This indicates that universities employ varied ways of punishing students who violate academic integrity. This may be as per their regulations and the specific offense committed.

### **Preventive Strategies for Academic Integrity Violations**

The study aimed to identify effective strategies for positively impacting academic integrity violations. The proposed measures encompass a comprehensive approach: These include disciplinary actions such as suspension, warnings, and advising students to cultivate truthfulness and trustworthiness. Providing guidance and counseling, emphasizing personal discipline, and ensuring strong supervision during examinations through increased lecturer presence or the installation of security cameras in examination rooms. Implementing strict examination invigilation rules and fostering proximity to learners to encourage consistent study habits.

Additional proposals involve incorporating frequent low-stakes assessments and increasing the number of Continuous Assessment Tests (CATs). Teaching physically rather than relying on online classes, allowing time for revision by concluding lectures before examinations, and utilizing progressive assessments over summative evaluations. Other strategies include effective utilization of lecture time, formative evaluation, creating awareness through examination integrity forums, and providing at least two weeks of personal study time before examinations. Incorporating digital responsibility discussions, using multiple assessment styles, and introducing open book examinations.

Some deterrent measures include labeling and embarrassing students without suspension for rectification, proper frisking by lecturers, punishment outweighing the outcome of violations, and promoting commitment among lecturers and students. Collaborative learning, social ostracism, imposing fines, providing early access to examination timetables, setting easier questions to encourage application techniques, and allowing only students with 80% lecture attendance to sit for exams are suggested approaches. Encouraging participation in group discussions, repairing lockers to prevent writing, and ensuring timely provision of learning resources are recommended. Stricter punishment for academic integrity violations, practical learning experiences, and proactive teaching and examination supervision are highlighted. Reducing panic through thorough exam preparation, educational programs on academic integrity, and emphasizing authentic teaching and assessment are also vital components.



In essence, the proposed strategies emphasize the importance of quality teaching, learning, and assessment in universities.

### **Importance of Discouraging Cheating**

The survey revealed that 96.4% of respondents consider it crucial to discourage academic integrity violations, while 3.6% expressed a contrary view. Those in favor emphasized various reasons, such as preventing frustration, promoting genuine self-evaluation, placing individuals according to their capabilities, producing well-rounded graduates, avoiding laziness and lack of focus, and ensuring the development of skilled personnel for sustainable progress.

Additionally, discouraging cheating was seen as essential for fostering life discipline, instilling values of integrity and honesty, enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, and producing competent professionals. It was also viewed as ethical, promoting independence, a culture of hard work, and quality education. The deterrent effect on destructive shortcuts, promotion of innovation and critical thinking skills, and the establishment of a motto emphasizing the importance of genuine effort for success were highlighted.

On the contrary, the 3.6% who opposed discouraging cheating argued that it is a pervasive issue that won't cease, referencing the success of individuals who have cheated their way through life and noting concerns about impunity in Kenya.

It is crucial to emphasize that the majority of students value academic integrity, necessitating continuous efforts by higher learning institutions to educate on the negative impacts of academic dishonesty on a student's academic life.

## **IV. DISCUSSION**

University students have a good understanding of academic integrity and by extension what is expected of them. The students' understanding agrees with Macfarlane et al. (2014) who state that academic integrity, encompasses the values, behaviour and conduct of academics in all aspects of their practice. For example, taking quality as the satisfaction of the client (student) the teaching must make the student fit for the purpose, add value in the life of the student, support and encourage the student to achieve the expected skills to respond to the needs of society in their respective areas of study and beyond.

One of the indicators of quality teaching and learning is the students' ability to be able to objectively take their examinations. Hénard and Roseveare (2012) state that quality teaching is the use of pedagogical techniques to produce learning outcomes for students. It involves several dimensions, including the effective design of curriculum and course content, a variety of learning contexts (including guided independent study, project-based learning, collaborative learning, and experimentation), soliciting and using feedback, and effective assessment of learning outcomes. It also involves well-adapted learning environments and student support services. Morris (2018) opined that academic integrity promotes good virtues among students and therefore prevents them from cheating or engaging in other unethical behaviour. To maintain academic integrity in contemporary higher education institutions, Morris (2018) proposed five core areas which must be investigated including: ascertaining the academic integrity strategy to be adopted, understanding students' needs, revising institutional policies, addressing assessment practices, and enhancing staff development.

All universities have or are expected to have examination rules and regulations. The findings of the study indicate that may be some of the forms of cheating are highlighted in these regulations and policies. Brimble (2016) stressed that lapses in integrity policies and failure on the part of actors account for dishonest behaviour of students. Quality assurance on the other hand is evaluating ourselves against our regulations and policies – higher learning institutions must tighten their belts on this one.

On the issue of challenges leading to cheat, a long list is a big challenge to universities, and this confirms what Guerreo-Dib et al. (2022) asserted that academic leaders in higher education institutions today are saddled with the responsibility of upholding high integrity among faculty members and students. This by extension is a challenge in quality assurance to quality experts in ensuring continuous internal and external quality checks. Students and staff are to be brought on board and sensitized on quality matters in all aspects, especially examination processes.

Tadesse et al. (2018) found out in their study that the students valued understandable learning content, a suitable learning environment, the availability of necessary learning materials and proper time for learning as important ingredients of quality teaching and learning. Additionally, student-centred teaching, which signifies active learning, the participation of all students, the association of theories with practice, appraisal mechanisms for staff, provision of relevant support and authentic assessment as important considerations in quality teaching and learning practices enhances academic integrity.

Lertpratchya et al. (2017) provide three reasons why higher education institutions are essential channels to communicate sustainability effectively: 1) Despite the different inequalities, many people attend universities and colleges 2) the largest number of students enrolled in higher education are in late adolescence (18 to 21), a critical age for identity development and 3) most often the college/university education is the last stage of education level before entering in the labour world, where they play an influential role as professionals.

## Conclusion

Academic integrity should be an outstanding agenda in institutions of higher learning. This is an issue that should be addressed and maintained for sustainability. Universities should not only put a lot of emphasis on the output in terms of examining students but also on the process of teaching, developing content, enhancing student interaction collaboration, and assessment styles. It is clear that academic integrity violations are rampant in universities and students are aware of the practices including the consequences. Notably, students are also aware of the significance of upholding academic integrity and its role in producing quality, competent, and responsible graduates/professionals that impact positively on sustainable development. In addition, respondents have proposed very good alternative strategies of discouraging academic integrity violations. Therefore, one of the priorities in education should be associated with solidifying academic integrity as a component of sustainable development. Besides, the developed framework that has originated from the current research should be adopted for promotion of the academic integrity culture in higher learning institutions, not only in Kenya but in the globe.

## Recommendations

The study makes the following recommendations based on the findings:

- i. Universities should strengthen institutional policies and enforce implementations to restore ethical values like trust and honesty in students and staff.
- ii. Besides, institutions of higher learning should provide adequate resources and infrastructure in the form of effective curriculum, time, discussion rooms, committed and responsible academic staff to curb cheating among students.
- iii. Universities should embrace authentic teaching, learning, and assessment, effective assessment of learning outcomes, and mentorship. Also, enforce continuous quality checks on student progression and teaching methodology.
- iv. Additionally, universities should embrace new and diverse ways of punishment such as the introduction of hefty fines, labelling of students as academic violators, and social ostracizing.
- v. Universities should consider painting lecture halls and have lockers/desks that cannot be written on, release examination timetables at the beginning of the semester, encourage lecturers' commitment to their responsibility and encourage staff to be close to students to motivate them in their academic pursuits.
- vi. Consequently, in order to deal with academic integrity violations and breed a culture of sustainable academic integrity, universities need to adopt the **Academic Integrity for Sustainable Quality Education Framework (AISQE Framework)** as proposed by the authors. The framework highlights major tenets of academic integrity as quality control checks, leadership and management, resources, teaching, learning and assessment. All these components are interdependent and promotes academic integrity hence quality education for sustainable education.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of Interest was reported by the Authors.

## Notes on Contributors

### 1. Joan Wakasa Murumba

Joan is currently working as an Information Literacy Librarian – which is a faculty position at Texas A & M International University in the US. Previously she worked as a lecturer of Library and Information Sciences, Director of Open, Distance and E-learning, Director of ICT, HoD of Department of Computer Science, and Informatics at Karatina University and as a campus Librarian at Kenya Methodist University. Wakasa's areas of concentration and competencies lie in the areas of Information and knowledge management, Information literacy, instructional design, scholarly communication, and embedded librarianship.

### 2. Jackline Okello Alari

Jackline is an administrator with good leadership skills, competence, thoroughness, commitment, firm, creative, self-drive, a strong team player with good communication skills. Alari is currently working as the Deputy Registrar Academic Affairs at Karatina University, worked as a registrar at Marist International College and as a lecturer.

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**Figure 4:**

*AISQE Framework, 2022*

