The Emerging Erosion of Originality and Academic Writing Skills in Higher Education in Africa: The Boomerang Effects of Information Explosion

"It is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation."

Herman Melville

"When you have wit of your own, it is a pleasure to credit other people for theirs."

Criss Jami,

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, higher institutions, all over the world have

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seen the democratization and commercialization of tertiary education which have resulted in massive classes. Paradoxically, the huge numbers and classes that should have attracted massive investments in a bid to neutralize

the consequences of large classes are rather expressing dwindling government support, especially in the case of Africa. Whereas the huge classes have come with some institutional and pedagogical implications for teaching and learning, the quality of tertiary education in Africa has largely been compromised. One area in which the compromise of quality is noticeable, as this paper argues, is in the emerging erosion of originality and academic writing skills, resulting from the information explosion that

the world is expressing. This study relies on both secondary and primary data. The primary data are garnered from experiential observations as a teacher of academic writing, a reviewer, a supervisor and an examiner of students' projects, dissertations and theses.[1] Having examined the concepts of originality and writing skills, the centrality of research to higher institutions' life, the increases in enrolment with the attendant consequences on teaching and learning, and the attack on originality and academic writing skills, this article concludes that with this emerging erosion, the higher institutions in Africa are shirking their raison d'être which is to turn out critical and independent thinkers. To address this, lecturers, the institutions, the governments and supra-state organizations have unique roles to play in addressing the emerging erosion of originality and writing skills.

The Conceptualization of Originality and Writing Skills

There has not been a consensus between scholars, teachers and their students on what originality actual means. Many reasons may account for this. One reason is attributable to disciplinary differences and their specific demands of, and conventions on, originality. Also, different levels of study may also make different demands of originality. For instance, the standard of originality that a Ph.D. student is expected to demonstrate in his/her work will invariably be higher than the one expected from an undergraduate (The University of Melbourne n.d).

While originality is derived from the word original – "[which] has been present or existing from the beginning" – people now use

both in contrasting manners to refer to something that is new or "novel, fresh, or unusual" (Krapež 2013: 945). One of the seminal explanations to the concept of originality or an original contribution to knowledge is Thomas Kuhn's (1970) concept of a paradigm shift. In explaining how knowledge increases, Kuhn stated that normal science, as a body of paradigms, reigns and then experiences instability resulting from "anomalous puzzles" that challenge the normal science (status quo). The responses to the "anomalous puzzles" constitute original contributions to normal science, thereby leading to paradigm shifts (1970). Some scholars also see originality "as using a new approach, method, or data, studying a new a topic and doing research in an understudied area, as well as producing new theories or findings" (Guetzkow, Lamont, and Mallard 2004: 191). Gleaned from the foregoing definitions, originality is broad and starts with the conception of research, its design and implementation to the research report writing. Nonetheless, the focus of this article is what we see in the research report writing.

Academic writing skills too, have not attracted a single definition. While some consensus can be achieved on the main components of academic writing skills, there are discipline specificities that are strictly safeguarded. Generally, academic writing skills are the stock-in-trade of academics, scholars, and students. They refer to a set of formal transferable skills that scholars and students demonstrate in academic write-ups, and in which they show a mastery of specific writing skills and conventions. The conventions may, include but are not limited to

the following: a coherent structure with a logical and systemic presentation; a grammatically accurate and well-punctuated write-up, a reader-centered writing style with an appropriate tone, a well-referenced and up-to-date essay, and a well-argued and balanced write-up among others (UEfAP n.d). In exploring the advantages of effective writing, Watton, Collings, and Moon (2001:4), stated that "[r]effective writing provides an opportunity for [one] to gain further insights from [one's] work through deeper reflection on [one's] experiences, and through further consideration of other perspectives from people and theory. Through reflection we can deepen the learning from [our] work." Also, students' writings "reflect students' ability to read critically, interpret, analyse and synthesise ideas as well as use writing as a discursive space for constructing social identities" (Pineteh 2013: 12). To underscore the significance of originality and academic writing skills to knowledge production, there is the need to examine the centrality of research in higher institutions.

The Centrality of Research to Higher Institutions' Life

Universities, and by extension, higher institutions perform three core activities. First, they teach by producing and disseminating specialized knowledge in various academic fields and engage students in transferable skills such as critical and analytical thinking, and research methods. Second, universities also conduct research works to respond to societal demands and crises. Third, having conducted research, they share their findings with their clientele and the larger society, and engage in community services in various forms such as outreach activities,

open days, consultations, and workshops. In all these trifocal activities, research is central to the universities' life in that it informs teaching and curriculum development such that academics have the chance to revise their notes in line with the new findings from their research works. Similarly, research also shapes the universities' engagements with their immediate communities and the world at large. When it comes to knowledge production, universities or higher institutions direct and shape the transition of their students from the rote learning they were accustomed to in the secondary schools to critical and independent learning, which is typical of university/higher education. Therefore, research plays a crucial role in the assignments, group work, project works, theses and dissertation among others at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

The Increases in Enrolment and Pedagogical Implications for Higher Institutions

Starting from the 1970s, higher education in Africa has been experiencing some transformations. From these periods, higher education has seen democratization or massification that has resulted in massive increases in enrolment (Musisi and Muwanga 2003; Mohamedbhai 2008, 2014). In Ghana, for instance, whereas enrolment in the public universities in 1991/92 academic year was a little below 12,000 students by the 2003/2004 academic year it had quintupled. In the case of Nigeria, the enrolment grew exponentially with the number of higher institutions. With six universities in 1970, by 2006 Nigeria could boast of approximately 240 higher institutions with 1.5 million

students (Materu 2006). Similar trends occurred in Ethiopia, Mozambique and Uganda, where enrolments in higher institutions starting from 2000 increased by more than ten-fold. By 2011, enrolments by more than five-fold in the same countries (Mohamedbhai 2014).

That these increases in enrolments, a global trend, have been taking place with disproportionate increases in funding, and in fact, with dwindling government support, has engendered the commercialization urges of many universities. Some universities in East and West Africa have introduced fee-paying courses to augment the partially government-subsidized courses, an initiative that means huge numbers and large classes for these universities to handle (The Guardian 2011). Furthermore, besides the distance education that many universities run, some universities have introduced what they call parallel courses, which lecturers teach in the evenings and at weekends for those whose professional commitment keep them busy during the weekdays. Moreover, some universities also mount what they call sandwich courses, which lecturers teach when their universities are expected to be in recess (Oketch 2016). In most cases, these initiatives mean that the same facilities and lecturers are recycled all year round resulting in overstretched facilities and lecturers (Musisi and Muwanga 2003; Mohamedbhai 2008, 2014).

Evidently, these transformations resulting from the democratization, the massification and the commercialization of higher education in Africa have primarily meant that quantity has replaced quality in the provision of higher education. The huge numbers

that have invariably meant large classes have come with an extreme jeopardy in the quality of teaching and learning. In fact, according to Foley and Masingila's (2013: 267) studies, "[l]arge classes of between 300 and 1,000, and even more, at the undergraduate level are not uncommon in a number of [Sub-Sahara] countries."[2] Nonetheless, large classes are not much of a problem as Boughey (2015) notes if governments and other education stakeholders are willing and able to make huge investments in providing the state-of-the-art classrooms to accommodate the large numbers because with that most of the problems that are associated with the large classes would have been adequately addressed. On the contrary, starting from the point of delivery to both the formative and summative assessments of teaching and learning, the quality has primarily been compromised. It needs to be stressed that the challenges – ranging from the over-congested cathedral-like classrooms that are often poorly ventilated and ill-equipped to students' complaints of audibility difficulties and poor chalkboard visibility; from the inequality in teachers' distribution of attention that favours the front benchers to the limited students' participation; and from the lecturers' inability to capture the heterogeneity factors in the classroom to the lecturers' inability to ensure sustained students' interests in the lesson – overwhelm even the most experienced and smart lecturers (Machika, Bruin, & Albertyn 2014).

Due to the lack of adequate resources, many universities are unable to organize tutorials to augment and address some of the challenges that are wrought by

large classes. Besides the issues of large classes and contact with students, the content of delivery has also largely changed. A study that Mohamedbhai (2008) conducted in Ghana, revealed that the institutional requirement for a series of continuous assessment (CA) for a semester had been relaxed to just one continuous assessment (CA) per semester in response to the large classes. As a consequence to the teaching load, in many cases, the feedback from the continuous assessment are not timely for students' development and transformation.

The Attack on Originality and Academic Writing Skills

Given the centrality of research to universities' life and given the universities' role in transforming students to critical and independent thinkers as we stated earlier, originality and academic writing skills have been the worst casualties of the democratization, massification, and commercialization of higher education in Africa. The causality of originality and academic writing skills resulting from the "marginalization of writing from [the] mainstream curricula" (Archer 2010: 496 cited in Pineteh 2013:12) has come in various ways. First, as a coping strategy, many lecturers' preference for multiple choice questions for the ease of marking instead of essay questions may be understandable. Often, Questions Moderation Committee that performs the quality assurance role relaxes its insistence on setting essay questions although it is less debatable that essay questions invoke critical, analytical and writing skills, whereas the typical demand of multiple choice questions is recall (Mohamedbhai

2008). Second, at the levels of undergraduate courses in some universities in Ghana, students have the option of doing research projects leading to writing a dissertation or doing coursework in its stead. This paper contends that giving students the option to skip a vital area of developing critical mind compromises the fundamental role of universities. Also, some Masters' programmes are run not with the normal thesis/dissertation which requires some research and academic writing skills but with Term Papers which are more or less an advanced form of class essays. Additionally, in some cases where students who were admitted to a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) programme could not cope with the research and academic writing component, their degree was scaled down to a Master degree with a term paper. Consequently, many students, according to Mohamedbhai (2008: 35) are "graduating with little practice for undertaking research, critical analysis and writing." Meanwhile, at the level of the lecturers, too, the disproportionate emphasis on teaching does not only make research and publishing a quagmire for many, but also damages the research culture in higher education in many respects that are beyond the scope of this paper.

Besides the foregoing institutional and pedagogical responses to the phenomenon of the large classes that have mostly translated into the "marginalization" (Archer 2010: 496 cited in Pineteh 2013:12) of academic writing skills, the Open Access System, the incidence of predatory journals and the fact that some students put their dissertation/theses online offer the platforms of evidence for the increasing decline in originality

and academic writing skills. That the information explosion resulting from the contemporary science and technology, which has made abundant information available at the touch of a button has created a boomerang effect of eroding originality and academic writing skills because "opportunities for cheating have exploded" (Singh and Remenyi 2016). Evidently, the Internet is playing a trilateral role of being the evidence, the catalyst and the checker for the nascent diminishing of originality and academic writing skills in higher education in Africa. This erosion manifests itself in many forms – but not limited to the most crucial ones – including referencing errors, structure and paragraphing difficulties, language and grammatical issues, literature review challenges, and the widespread misconduct of plagiarism among others in the essays submitted for assessment.

Students present written work that demonstrates many referencing errors that may result from ignorance or sloppiness or inappropriate orientation. It would appear that many students do not know that any evidence, except general knowledge specific to a context or a discipline, that is provided in an academic paper must be cited through one of the following methods namely, in-text reference, footnote, and endnotes.[3] Additionally, the core function, which structure and paragraphs perform in aiding readers' comprehension, is rarely seen in many assignments and essays that students submit these days. While the information may be vital, poor structure and presentation may render it unreadable. Moreover, the sorts of grammar with which students present their essays demonstrate that standards are

eroding. Another unsatisfactory spot in many students' write-ups, these days, is the literature review. The literature review has been reduced to a somewhat catalog of the previous works jammed together without the writers' evaluation. Literature reviews – which requires students' critical and analytical skills in doing a comparative evaluation of the relevant previous works – is more of an explanation than evaluation in many students' essay now. (Jesson & Lacey 2006). Therefore, the core pillars upon which a critical review is based – namely, citing as many previous works as possible, comparing and contrasting the works, critiquing the works, and finally connecting the previous works to what is being done now – are beginning to be absent in many students' reviews (Edith Cowan University n.d).

The most serious dimension of the emerging erosion of originality in higher institutions in Africa is plagiarism, which defeats the very purpose of research. Plagiarism, according to Rampolla, is "the act of taking the words, ideas, or research of another person and putting them forward without citation as if they were your own." (Rampolla 2004: 70). Nonetheless, the actually meaning of what constitutes adequate citation is problematic to many students as well as lecturers. In a study that Orim (2015) conducted in Nigeria, some lecturers were as confused as many students about the actual meaning of plagiarism, a situation that may not be different in other African countries.

While one may be tempted to suggest that plagiarism has come with the advent of the Internet and the Open Access System, plagiarism certainly predated the arrival of the Internet (Jaschik 2008). However, it can be said without the fear of contradiction that the Internet with the accompanied information explosion has made plagiarism a widespread academic misconduct among many students (Singh and Remenyi 2016). Many students are guilty of both "unintentional" and "deliberate" plagiarism. Whereas many students, as a result of poor citation skills, plagiarize other people's ideas inadvertently, the intentional practice of "cut and paste" of other people's ideas is now widespread (Rampolla 2004: 70) Some institutions are still grappling with whether a mere acknowledgment is sufficient for a substantial input by a statistical analyst with or without acknowledgement.

Toward Addressing the Emerging Erosion of Originality and Academic Writing Skills

That Africa is at the margin of knowledge production with its 1.1 to 1.4 percent share of world's knowledge production (Kariuki 2015; Zambakari 2011) and that the best university in the continent ranked 317th in the global ranking index in 2017 (Ghana News Agency 2017) signifies that the higher institutions in Africa must take the emerging erosion of originality and academic writing skills seriously. Addressing this emerging erosion of originality and writing skills will require concerted efforts at the levels of the lecturers, the institutions, the African governments and the supra-state cooperation.

Lecturers are at the center of knowledge production and the safeguard of its quality. Therefore, they have a critical role to play in enforcing originality and academic writing standards. If academic integrity is upheld, lecturers will put a premium on standard and original work and devise various ways to detect those who are violating the standards and engaging in plagiarism, even though the task of checking may be time-consuming. While this article does not downplay the organized ways in which a plagiarism software checks for plagiarism, in the absence of the software there are many things that lecturers can do. Getting the appropriate orientation about plagiarism whether through self-learning or formal training should be considered a key part of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for lecturers, which will positively reflect in their teaching, research, and other allied activities.

While having a policy on plagiarism and research ethics may be considered a step in the right direction, the higher institutions in Africa should develop a positive attitude towards checking plagiarism so that they can go beyond the availability of policies to enforce and implement them. If the higher institutions accept predatory journals for promotion, it may be difficult for lecturers to take academic integrity seriously. Therefore, measures should be put in place to reject and report plagiarized works so that appropriate sanctions can be meted out to culprits. Also, the Quality Assurance Units (QAU) in the various higher institutions should be equipped to play a lead role in instituting and deepening quality assurance practices in teaching and learning. Through organizing workshops and training, the QAU can also play a central role in giving the right orientation towards avoiding plagiarism and upholding academic integrity.

It is noteworthy to state that the higher institutions in Africa should give an increasing support to research and create an appropriate research culture that privileges originality in their institutions. Also, it is essential to note that higher institutions have always thrived by teaching and research coinciding each other and, therefore, lecturer's workload should be balanced to respect the simultaneity of the two. Furthermore, when experienced academics collaborate in scholarly endeavors, mentorship can become a useful tool in teaching originality. African higher institutions should provide logistic support and facilities in checking "un-originality" (Krapež 2013), mediocrity, and plagiarism. Moreover, students' accessibility to the Internet and computers may mean that students can submit their assignments and project works in softcopies thereby making it easy for lecturers to check for plagiarism before they begin marking.

Addressing the issue of erosion of originality will require giving students the appropriate orientation on research and academic writing standards. Getting the tools for plagiarism detection or having a policy on plagiarism is not as important as educating students on the appropriate orientation for avoiding plagiarism. Also, that the majority of the senior secondary graduates come to the universities primarily ungrounded in writing skills as Sifuna and Sawamura (2010) note, means that there should be some remedial teaching to prepare them for university work.

As an important stakeholder, African governments should understand that quality education demands huge investments in human and infrastructure resources. The government embargo on employment in public sectors including tertiary institutions in Ghana and Nigeria while enrolments continue to increase will undoubtedly militate against producing quality education (Ibeh 2015; Andoh 2017). The African governments should support the creation of centers of excellence, language centers and scientific laboratories that are equipped with the state-of-the-art facilities. While critical observers have welcomed the Ghanaian government's initiative to establish a Tertiary Education Research Fund, they think that such a fund should be additional to the book and research allowance that the government pays to university and polytechnic lecturers annually.

Also, at the supra-state level, supranational organizations such as the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Develop-ment Community (SADC) among others can support African higher institutions in creating research centers of excellence and sponsoring exchange programmes among African universities. Moreover, the Association of African Universities (AAU) can play a significant role in addressing this erosion by capturing this in some of its projects that relate to training and exchange programmes. For its part, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) should continue to organize its annual Workshop for Scholarly Publishing for both Anglophone and Francophone countries that aims at providing training to young academics and those in their early careers. Given the practicality and usefulness of the training, the Council should source more funding to increase the number of the participants.[4]

Conclusion

The main motivation of this article has been to draw the attention of the stakeholders of higher institutions in Africa to how the increases in enrolments have restructured teaching and learning and how the information explosion – which the world is experiencing – is serving as the evidence, the catalyst and the checker of the emerging erosion of originality and academic writing skills. The article has pointed out that originality and academic writings are not only the stock-in-trade of academics and their students, but they are also the core of what higher institutions stand for. Viewed against the background that Africa contributes less than two percent to world production of knowledge, the consequences of emerging erosion of originality and academic writings may be dire. The lecturers, the higher institutions, the governments and supra-state organizations must play their part in addressing the problem.

Notes

1. Here, I refer to essays, assignments, project works, and dissertations among others at the undergraduate and at the Master's and MPhil levels.

2. It needs to be stated that the natural sciences attract comparatively low enrolments as compared to the social sciences and the humanities.

3. There are referencing styles that make specific demands of the writers. The American Psychological Association (APA) and the Modern Language Asso-ciation (MLA) Referencing Styles are the most popular in the social sciences.

4. I am grateful to CODESRIA for sponsoring my participation in the 2013 CODESRIA Workshop on Writing for Scholarly Publishing in Kampala, Uganda. Since then, I have actively been organising workshops for graduate students and academic staff at some tertiary institutions in Ghana.

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