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Ethics in Nigerian higher education: Mirroring the dilemma in mass communication departments

Blessed F. Ngonso¹, Peter E. Egielewa¹, Giuseppe T. Cirella^{2,3,*}

¹ Department of Mass Communication, Edo State University Uzairue, Edo State 312102, Nigeria

² Faculty of Economics, University of Gdansk, 81-824 Sopot, Poland

³ University Center for Social and Urban Studies, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA

* **Corresponding author:** Giuseppe T. Cirella, gt.cirella@ug.edu.pl

CITATION

Ngonso BF, Egielewa PE, Cirella GT. Ethics in Nigerian higher education: Mirroring the dilemma in mass communication departments. *Forum for Education Studies*. 2024; 2(4): 1600.
<https://doi.org/10.59400/fes1600>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 7 August 2024
Accepted: 31 October 2024
Available online: 8 November 2024

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Abstract: This study examines the application of ethical principles within Nigerian tertiary institutions, with a specific focus on mass communication departments, including journalism, public relations, and advertising, across selected higher education institutions. Utilizing an online questionnaire distributed to students and conducting interviews with lecturers, the research assesses the extent of ethical practices and their effects on both students and staff. This study critically reviews the existing literature on Nigeria's higher education system, ethical awareness in higher education, and ethics implementation at the departmental level, guided by rule utilitarianism. The findings indicate that despite lecturers' repeated efforts to educate students on the importance of upholding ethical values, exam malpractice remains the most prevalent ethical issue plaguing mass communication departments. It is recommended that ethical orientation begin in adolescence to shape the development of Nigerian youth. Additionally, ethics should be incorporated into the educational curriculum at all levels, from primary to tertiary education.

Keywords: student ethics; lecturers; tertiary institutions; learning; rule utilitarianism; Nigeria

1. Introduction

In order to meet the ever-increasing demand for higher education in Nigeria, both state and federal governments are responsible for providing services to 217 universities, 64 polytechnics, and 152 colleges throughout the country [1]. Notably, most of the universities and polytechnics in Nigeria offer programs in mass communication. The first department of mass communication was established at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), which was the first indigenous university in the country, founded by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe in 1961. The department focused on journalism, public relations, and advertising and was named after the popular journalist Payne Jackson, whose son Horatio Jackson became the first head of the department. To aid in training, *The Records* newspaper was established as an important tool in journalism education. Consequently, it is appropriate to say that UNN's Jackson College of Journalism is the gold standard for the training of Nigerian journalists. Guanah [2] explains that journalists in Nigeria were originally trained through apprenticeship, with direct contact with editors and senior colleagues, and observation, long before UNN began offering journalism courses. The department, under the Jackson College of Journalism, graduated its first set of students in 1964 and continued to do so until 1966, when the Nigerian-Biafra civil war began and halted the department's progress in the country before resuming after the conflict [3,4].

Currently, numerous Nigerian universities and polytechnics offer mass communication as a course of study. Some of the most renowned institutions in Nigeria with a department of mass communication include, but are not limited to: UNN; University of Ibadan; Bayero University, Kano; Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria; University of Abuja; Edo State University, Uzairue; Enugu State University, Enugu; Rivers State University, Port Harcourt; and Caritas University, Enugu. Higher education in Nigeria is experiencing an increase in demand, with many young Nigerians seeking admission to the department of mass communication due to the proliferation of media outlets in the country. Undoubtedly, the high demand for mass communication programs in Nigerian universities and polytechnics poses significant challenges for these departments.

It is widely recognized that Nigerian universities face severe infrastructural deficits, exacerbated by various financial crises, administrative inefficiencies, and climate-induced events throughout the country [5]. These issues, coupled with mismanagement of resources, have led to significant deficiencies in essential facilities and resources, adversely impacting the overall quality of education and academic operations [6,7]. Guanah [2] characterizes the situation as “pathetic,” with many lecturers lacking well-equipped offices and relying on chalkboards instead of PowerPoint and other interactive media. Additionally, they teach in poorly maintained classrooms without steady power supply, forcing them to power their offices and studios with personal generators. Mass communication lecturers also face other issues such as lack of regular promotion, inadequate funding for research, and insufficient training in technical areas like editing, graphics, photojournalism, cinematography, and live radio and television presentations. Moreover, they often suffer from low salaries due to government neglect, and their requests for pay raises have been rejected repeatedly, leading to numerous strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). Over the period of Nigeria’s democratic history since 199, ASUU has engaged in 63 months of strikes, disrupting lectures in mass communication programs as well as other departments [8]. These strikes have lasted from as little as three days to as long as six months, seriously affecting the quality of education in Nigerian universities.

Dating back to 2008, Nigerian lecturers expressed their dissatisfaction once again due to poor pay and staged a one-week warning strike that disrupted the university system. The following year, in 2009, the educational system for Nigerian students faced challenges when lecturers went on strike for four months. Another ASUU strike occurred in 2010 and lasted for five months. In 2011, ASUU resumed their strike action after the government failed to fulfill their promise regarding the pay rise. The strike lasted for approximately two months, around 59 days. In 2013, ASUU resumed another strike that lasted for five months as they called for the government’s attention to their situation. In 2017, ASUU went on strike for a month, while in 2018, the government could not meet ASUU’s demands, leading to another strike action that lasted for three months [9]. In 2019, a few weeks of strike action ensued and was called off a few days before the general elections. In 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, ASUU went on strike again, and this time, it lasted for nine months. In 2021, the umbrella body of Nigerian lecturers was heavily affected by a new salary regime, the controversial Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System, which removed

some lecturers' names from the payroll and resulted in some earning only half of their monthly salary [10–13]. This pay system extended into 2022, which prompted ASUU to embark on another strike action from March 2022 to September 2022, with the strike still ongoing parts of 2023 [10,14].

This lamentable situation prompted a solidarity protest by the Nigerian Labour Congress, marking a new low for Nigerian lecturers. Unfortunately, there are several other factors impeding the quality of education in Nigeria. As Olujuwon et al. [15] point out, the Nigerian educational system, as well as the nation as a whole, is plagued by social decay, governance confusion, moral decay, corruption and corrupt practices, wanton destruction of lives and property by Boko Haram insurgency [16], nefarious acts of Fulani herdsmen, and kidnapping for ransom, which all have untold effects on teaching and learning. Understandably, these unsavory developments have eroded the core values that are essential to the educational sector and Nigerian society [17,18]. This paper provides insights into why Nigerian universities face severe ethical dilemmas.

As such, a lecturer who is hungry is likely to be less committed to their responsibilities compared to a satisfied lecturer whose employer prioritizes fair pay and favorable working conditions. It is crucial to consider whether Nigerian lecturers understand that accepting money from a student for a higher grade undermines the integrity of their role. Additionally, their awareness of the moral obligation to teach students thoroughly, rather than directing them to materials and setting examination questions that they cannot answer, is important. Understanding the significance of ethics for Nigerian lecturers and students, particularly in mass communication departments, is essential given the challenges they face in fulfilling their responsibilities. These issues are explored to address the ethical imperatives for quality higher education, with a focus on mass communication departments as a representative sample of Nigeria's educational landscape. The study employs five research questions (RQs) to assess how ethical principles are perceived and observed within these departments.

RQ1: Are staff and students aware of ethical issues in higher education?

RQ2: What are the sources of information about ethical issues in higher education?

RQ3: How often are ethical issues disseminated to staff and students in mass communication departments?

RQ4: What is the degree of acceptance of ethical principles among staff and students in mass communication departments?

RQ5: What are the most prevalent ethical issues in mass communication departments, including sex for marks, forgery, tribal consideration and favoritism, cultism, and examination malpractice?

2. Literature review

2.1. Ethics and higher education

The ethical standards of any profession guide the moral principles that professionals are expected to uphold. Scholars have approached the study of ethics from various angles, each offering a distinct perspective on its meaning. For instance,

Nwabueze and Oragwu [19] describe ethics as the moral principles that direct a person's behavior and the manner in which they conduct their activities. Ukala and Nwabueze [20] see ethics as a branch of knowledge focused on moral principles that influence decision-making and lifestyle. Ajayi and Adeniji [21] characterize ethics as a set of customary principles and practices that embody normative codes of behavior expected from every member of a society or organization. Omisore and Adeleke [22] view ethics as the study of what is considered good and bad, right and wrong, emphasizing moral duties to individuals and organizations. Hoy et al. [23] define ethics as a branch of philosophy that systematizes, defends, and recommends concepts of right and wrong conduct within both organizational and societal contexts.

Ethics can also be understood as the attitudes and actions people exhibit towards others, as suggested by Ukala and Nwabueze [20], or as the science that evaluates human conduct, according to Anyaogu [24]. These definitions align with Parrish-Sprowl [25], who notes that ethical considerations permeate nearly every human action. Bewaji and Adedara [26] frame ethics as a moral philosophy concerned with behavior norms, distinguishing between right and wrong, and good and evil. Wimmer and Dominic [27] simplify it to mean that ethical behavior is simply the right thing to do. Collectively, these perspectives agree that ethical behavior is rooted in a belief that one is acting in a morally appropriate manner.

Ethics is integral to fostering sustainable human development, democracy, human dignity, freedom, solidarity, and the common good [28–31]. Olujuwon et al. [15] expand on this by emphasizing that ethics encompasses individuals' rights and responsibilities, moral decisions, and the language of right and wrong, shaping how individuals lead virtuous lives. Ajayi and Adeniji [21] focus on the impact of ethical behavior on human dignity and well-being, particularly in contexts where choices affect others. Casimir et al. [32] assert that academic ethics—defined as the moral principles guiding behavior in academic settings—relies on the cooperation of faculty and students to maintain institutional integrity. Ike [33,34] argues that a tertiary education system devoid of ethical principles cannot adequately serve the global society of the twenty-first century, suggesting that education should equip students with reflective knowledge that contributes to responsible citizenship and personal development. This perspective resonates with the utilitarian ethics of thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham and John Gay, who advocated for actions that promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Rooted in classical theological beliefs, the utilitarian approach posits that humans have a moral duty to enhance the happiness of others while considering the natural consequences of their actions [35]. This theory advocates for promoting societal benefits and discouraging actions that cause harm. It suggests that ethical actions benefit a larger segment of society, while those that benefit only a few are likely unethical. In this context, actions like exam cheating, sexual coercion, forgery, favoritism, and cultism are deemed self-serving and detrimental to the broader community. For this study, the researchers adopt rule utilitarianism, which emphasizes justice, equity, and beneficence, and evaluate actions based on principles of law and fairness to determine their ethicality.

2.2. Ethical issues in Nigerian higher education

The Nigerian education system is facing a gradual decay caused by a lack of ethical standards due to negligence on the part of major stakeholders. Nigerian universities have experienced a decline in standards, deterioration of facilities, and examination malpractices, leading to a mass production syndrome, which has resulted in their inability to rank in the top 1000 universities in the world [36]. Ironically, the National Policy on Education, revised in 2015, states that teaching in Nigeria should achieve the highest possible standards since no education can surpass the quality of its teachers [37]. Ikechi and Akanwa [38] observed in their study that unethical practices have affected the educational system's prosperity in Nigeria, alleging that Nigerians can no longer take pride in their tertiary educational system, particularly the university system, as a citadel of learning and a center of academic excellence due to the erosion of core ethical values. This decay has been attributed to a range of factors, including the teacher factor. Teachers are considered the key custodians of ethical values in the educational system and are essential to its survival. Effective teaching has a significant impact on students' performance and serves as a source of inspiration. The teacher is responsible for communicating knowledge, skills, and values to students, making them a vital component of the educational system [15,37,38]. Thus, a teacher should possess a strong grasp of their subject matter, be well-versed in changing classroom situations, exhibit creative and analytical abilities, and possess general pedagogical skills while also understanding the ethical demands of both classroom and non-classroom situations. The worth of teachers is imperative to the quality of education in general and students' learning outcomes in particular.

Olujuwon et al. [15] noted that the Teachers' Registration Council of Nigeria Code of Conduct 2013 edition listed the following as unethical practices by teachers: aiding, abetting or assessing examination malpractice, taking advantage of students or teachers, negligence in duty by not attending classes as scheduled, unauthorized absenteeism, habitual lateness to school, sexual harassment, sex for marks, irregular or unauthorized award of marks, loss of interest in teaching, unnecessary exploitation of students and the system, and voluntary absenteeism from programs and workshops that would develop their efficiency and proficiency in classrooms. Ikechi and Akanwa [38] decried the widespread decay of the educational system in Nigeria and averred that "the rot has permeated every facet of the education sector. It cuts across all ages, parents, teachers, government, and society at large." As such, Nigerian students have also contributed to the decay of the educational system for certain reasons. This study examines five ethical issues that define the scope of this problem: sex for marks, forgery, tribal consideration and favoritism, cultism, and examination malpractice.

2.2.1. Sex for marks

Sex for marks has become a widespread practice in the Nigerian educational sector. Olujuwon et al. [15] assert that harassment occurs as sexual and physical harassment and the use of abusive language. Ikechi and Akanwa [38] allege that "many academics, especially the young ones, ask for sex in exchange for marks." As a result, this act usually leads to sexual harassment. Lack of commitment to studies on the part of the students, greed, transparency in the awards of marks, high cost of living and poor pay, and sometimes lack of pay to lecturers are among the variables that trigger

sexual harassment. Nidibe, as cited in Ikechi and Akanwa [38], labeled some degrees obtained in Nigerian universities as “sexually transmitted degrees,” particularly higher degrees obtained by working-class individuals such as bankers, engineers, lawyers, accountants, and others in well-paid jobs who seek higher degrees for promotion and possibly preparing for elective or political appointment are prompted to sex for grade syndrome.

2.2.2. Forgery

The prevalence of forgery in Nigerian society is reflective of the state of the higher education system [39–42]. Instances of forgery are rampant, with both students and lecturers involved in this unethical behavior [39,41]. For instance, students may forge their lecturers’ signatures to obtain late registration forms or falsify school fee receipts to be able to sit for exams. Furthermore, some students even forge their National Youth Service Corps statement of results and certificates, as well as their university certificates. Lecturers are also implicated in this crime, as they too may present fraudulent documents during recruitment and promotion interviews [43,44].

2.2.3. Tribal consideration and favoritism

Ethnic considerations have become a serious ethical issue in the Nigerian educational system. The problem begins with the recruitment of both teaching and non-teaching staff in tertiary institutions. Due to these flawed recruitment processes, the staff members recruited often feel obligated to assist their fellow tribesmen to obtain certificates from these institutions. According to Olujuwon et al. [15], “poor grading, inaccurate computation of results (as a result of direct or indirect demands for gratification), and favoritism based on ethnicity, religion, or gender” are detrimental to the Nigerian educational system.

2.2.4. Cultism

In a research study on ethical issues in the Nigerian education system and their influence on effective management of colleges of education in Delta State, Ofojebe [45] examined 23 unethical issues and identified cultism and gangsterism as one of the top 20 unethical practices. Cultism in Nigerian higher education takes various forms, including cults of personality and notorious activities that involve intimidation, theft, murder, victimization, and sexual assault against female students. Regrettably, some lecturers who were once members of these cults directly or indirectly support cult activities.

2.2.5. Examination malpractice

Examination malpractice is the act of cheating during an examination. According to Egielewa and Adejumo [46], an examination is an assessment given to students to evaluate their level of understanding of a particular subject, to validate their knowledge and skills in that subject, and to qualify them for a certificate, diploma, or degree. Examination malpractice is the most prevalent unethical practice in Nigerian higher education. This phenomenon may be attributed to the high demand for certificates rather than skills in the Nigerian job market. Examination malpractice has become deeply ingrained in the Nigerian educational system, with both students and lecturers participating in this illicit exercise. Ikechi and Akanwa [38] noted that “examination malpractices are the massive and unprecedented abuse of rules and

regulations pertaining to internal and public examinations.” In a recent study by Egielewa and Adejumo [46], it was found that two out of four Nigerian students who sat for the West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO) paid a cooperation fee, which automatically allowed them to cheat in the examination. In Nigeria, examination malpractice may take the form of bringing in prohibited materials such as handouts, textbooks, or prepared materials into the examination hall, impersonation, or assistance from lecturers or examiners in the form of providing answers or materials that help students to discover answers and cheat in the examination.

Another way that students and teachers engage in examination malpractice is by illicitly obtaining question papers and providing them to favored candidates, allowing them to complete their examination at their leisure with the help of textbooks. In the digital age, some students are able to outmaneuver examiners by bringing electronic devices into the examination hall to assist them in cheating, a practice known as electronically assisted malpractice. Collusion, a common tactic in large examination venues, involves candidates agreeing to sit together to facilitate copying from one another. According to Olujuwon et al. [15], “examinations become leakages of questions and improper invigilation” and are often facilitated by lecturers seeking favoritism or financial gain. According to Ofojebe’s [45] research on ethical issues in Nigerian education, there are 23 unethical behaviors that influence the effective management of higher education in Delta State. These behaviors include extortion and exploitation, forceful sales of textbooks, fraud and greed, cultism and gangsterism, sexual harassment and molestation, plagiarism, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, indecent dressing, assault and slander, examination malpractices and misconduct, impersonation, irregular attendance to class by lecturers, staff kidnapping, bribery and corruption, theft and stealing, gossip, indiscipline and dishonesty, and victimization of staff and students. It also revealed that the aforementioned practices scored an acceptable high mean score, indicating strong positive responses and agreements by academic staff regarding the types of unethical practices highly influencing that particular state.

3. Methods

This study employed a quantitative survey method using online questionnaires administered via Google Forms. To ensure a well-rounded representation, the researchers systematically selected institutions based on geographical spread and institutional size. Specifically, the study targeted higher education institutions in Edo State and Enugu State to cover both the South-South and South-Eastern regions of Nigeria, ensuring a broad geographical representation.

To achieve this, the researchers first compiled a comprehensive list of ten government-approved universities and polytechnics within these states. The selection process was designed to include institutions of varying sizes and types to reflect diverse educational environments. Four institutions were then chosen using a systematic approach that involved stratified sampling. This method ensured that each institution type (university and polytechnic) and size (large, medium, and small) had appropriate representation.

The systematic selection process involved categorizing the institutions into different strata based on their type and size. From each stratum, institutions were selected using a methodical approach to ensure that the sample reflected the diversity of the higher education landscape in the South-South and South-Eastern regions. The online questionnaire was distributed through WhatsApp, facilitated by lecturers, to reach students and staff efficiently and overcome logistical barriers. The study specifically focused on undergraduate students and lecturers due to the absence of post-graduate programs in some of the selected institutions, aligning the sample with the research objectives.

To ensure participant confidentiality, the specific names of the institutions involved in this study are not disclosed. The total population across the departments of these four institutions was approximately 2711, encompassing both students and faculty. A sample size of 462 was determined based on Yamane's [47] sample size table, which is appropriate for a population of this size. The online survey was conducted anonymously and received ethical approval from the Ethical Committee of the University of Gdansk. This study adhered to the ethical guidelines set forth in the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant Nigerian legislation, ensuring compliance with established ethical standards, particularly in terms of participant anonymity and confidentiality.

In addition to the survey, qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with two lecturers from each institution. These interviews were carried out in individual sessions to obtain comprehensive insights into the lecturer-student ethical relationship and the state of higher education in Nigeria. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's objectives and their rights. By anonymizing institutional details and securing appropriate ethical approvals, the study maintained high standards of participant protection and research ethics.

4. Results and discussion

The study results are presented in a systematic manner that sequentially corresponds to the RQs. Analysis of the data findings for each RQ is followed by descriptive data from the in-depth interviews.

4.1. RQ1

The findings of the study revealed that the majority of the students (84.6%) were fully aware or aware of ethics in their respective institutions. The respondents who demonstrated an awareness of ethics could be attributed to various reasons, such as the institution's policies and guidelines, student orientation programs, and the incorporation of ethics in the curriculum. However, a small proportion of the respondents (14.2%) stated that they were fully unaware or not aware of ethics in their institutions. This could be attributed to a lack of exposure to ethical principles, inadequate communication channels, or ineffective policies and guidelines regarding ethical practices within their respective institutions (**Figure 1**).

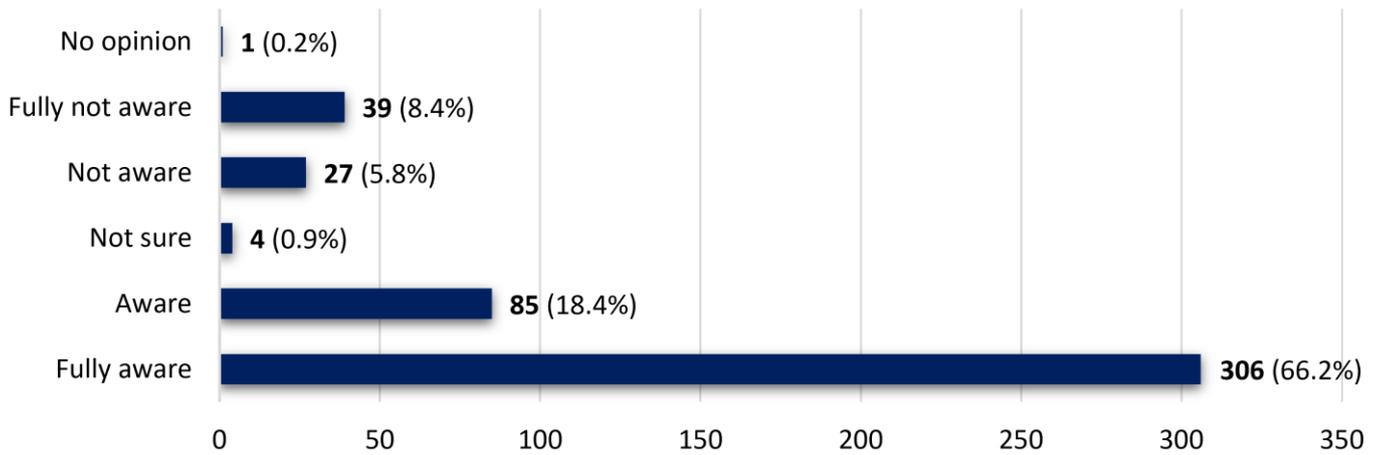


Figure 1. Response to RQ1: Are staff and students aware of ethical issues in higher education?

The in-depth interviews revealed a strong consensus among respondents regarding the role and importance of ethics within their respective mass communication departments. Overall, there is a significant recognition and belief in the necessity of academic ethics, which respondents see as fundamental to maintaining the integrity and quality of education. Interviewees emphasized that ethical principles are not merely formalities but are essential for upholding high standards within their departments. Many respondents noted that ethical guidelines are demonstrated in various aspects of their work, including interactions with students, supervision, and the evaluation of results. These ethical standards are perceived as crucial for the professional conduct of both staff and students, directly influencing the overall educational experience and the quality of graduates produced by the department.

Respondents recognized that ethical guidelines are often formally documented in departmental handbooks and university regulations, yet some are imparted informally during orientation sessions. This dual approach to ethical education is consistent with the findings of Omisore and Oyende [22], who noted that while formal policies are crucial, informal methods also play a significant role in ethical training within academic settings. The importance of these ethical principles was emphasized by several interviewees, reflecting the views of previous research by Nwikina [48], which underscores the role of ethical adherence in fostering trust and respect within the academic environment. Specific unethical practices highlighted by respondents, such as accepting money from students, manipulating results, and disclosing examination content prematurely, align with the concerns raised by Egielewa and Adejumo [46], who identified similar issues within the Nigerian education system. These practices not only compromise academic integrity but also reinforce systemic problems identified in the literature, such as the normalization of unethical behavior in educational contexts [44,49]. Integrating both formal and informal ethical education approaches, as suggested by these studies, could potentially enhance the effectiveness of ethical training and address these prevalent issues more comprehensively.

4.2. RQ2

The research findings presented in **Figure 2** demonstrate the various means through which students receive information about ethical issues. It is evident that

multiple channels are utilized to disseminate ethical values to students, with four primary means identified as the most prominent. These means include personal conversations between students and lecturers during classes, which accounted for 31.4% of responses; institution first day orientation with 28.4% of responses; departmental orientation with 18% of responses; and the student handbook with 15.2% of responses. These findings highlight the importance of providing ethical guidance to students through various means to ensure they are well-informed and equipped with the necessary knowledge to maintain ethical conduct. Moreover, it underscores the responsibility of institutions and their faculty members to continue to find innovative ways of disseminating ethical values to students in a practical and relatable manner.

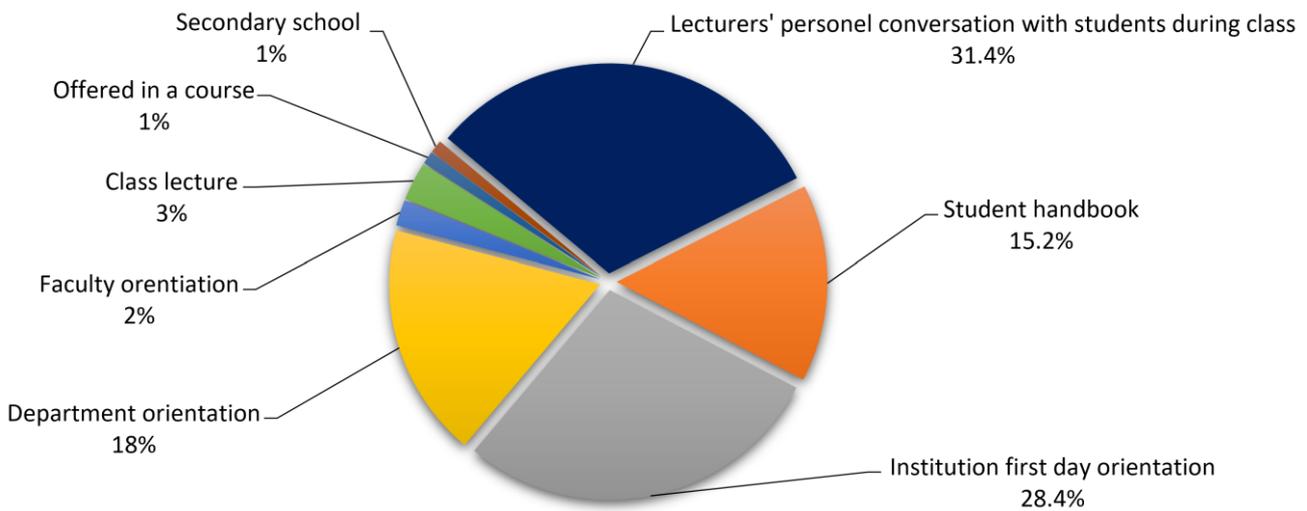


Figure 2. Response to RQ2: What are the sources of information about ethical issues in higher education?

The findings from the in-depth interviews reveal a nuanced approach to how ethical information is communicated to students across different educational settings. The predominant method of delivering ethical guidance is during lectures, where instructors seize the opportunity to discuss ethical issues in real-time. This approach is favored for its direct engagement, as students are attentive and receptive during class sessions. Several respondents emphasized that lectures provide a structured environment for addressing ethics, allowing for detailed discussions on acceptable behaviors and academic integrity.

Additionally, orientation sessions at the start of academic terms are a crucial avenue for imparting ethical information. These sessions typically combine verbal communication with written materials, such as student handbooks, which outline the expected ethical standards and practices. This approach aligns with the recommendations of scholars like Chen et al. [50], who emphasize the importance of early and structured ethical education in shaping students' understanding of moral expectations. This method ensures that students acquire foundational knowledge about ethics at the outset of their academic journey.

Furthermore, interpersonal communication plays a significant role in ethical education. Instructors often engage in informal yet impactful interactions to address ethical conduct. This includes brief discussions during class or personal advisement

sessions, where students receive tailored guidance on their behavior and responsibilities. Research by Brodhead and Higbee [51] and Paralta et al. [52] support this practice, indicating that informal interactions can effectively reinforce formal ethical training by providing context-specific advice and feedback. These personalized discussions help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, ensuring that students understand how to apply ethical principles in real-world scenarios. Thus, while orientation sessions provide essential foundational knowledge, ongoing interpersonal engagement allows for the reinforcement and contextualization of ethical standards throughout students' academic careers.

4.3. RQ3

The results from **Figure 3** revealed that, in general, students received counseling in ethics between 1–3 times. The data showed that 35.5% of the students received ethical counseling once, during the first-year orientation upon entry to the institution, and 30.7% received it twice, including both during the first-year orientation and again at pre-examinations and during classes. Meanwhile, 7.1% of the students had no counseling, while 8.9% received counseling three times, which included during religious worship. It is worth noting that ethical counseling plays a crucial role in shaping the ethical behavior of students. Hence, it is imperative for institutions to ensure that counseling is given frequently and consistently. As such, it may be beneficial to increase the frequency of counseling sessions or to integrate ethical discussions and considerations into regular coursework. Reflective of this, 6.7% of students in mass communication departments noted ethical training during a course (for example, journalism).

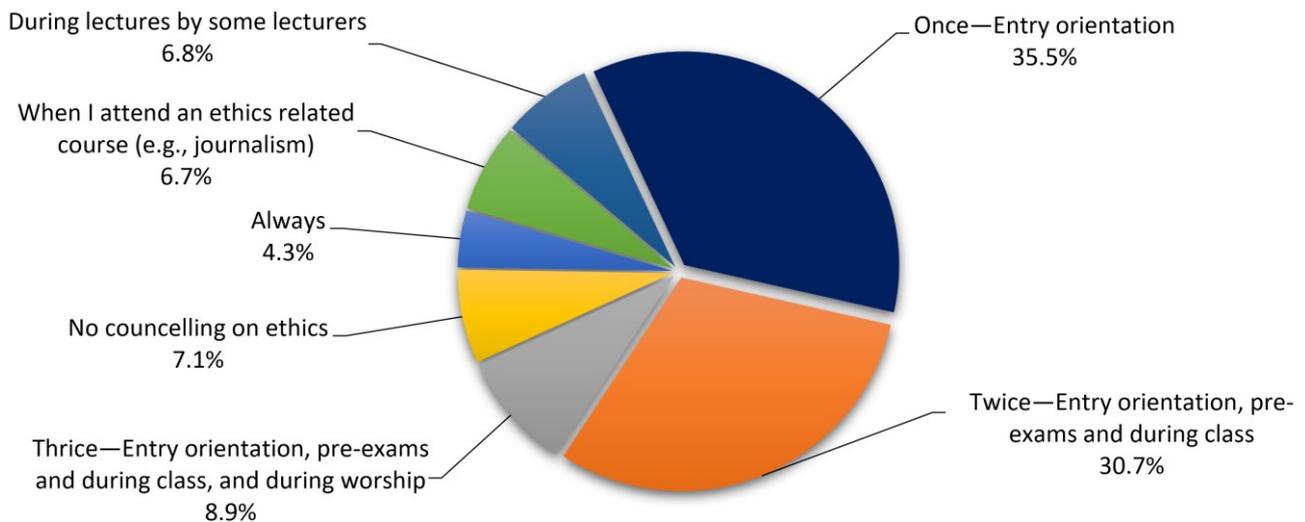


Figure 3. Response to RQ3: How often are ethical issues disseminated to staff and students in mass communication departments?

The dissemination of ethical principles among students varies significantly based on the practices of individual lecturers. Some educators incorporate ethical discussions regularly into their teaching, integrating these conversations seamlessly into their classes to ensure that students consistently engage with ethical issues. These lecturers

view ethical education as a vital component of their pedagogical approach and dedicate considerable effort to embedding these principles into their students' learning experiences. In contrast, other lecturers address ethical issues less frequently, often focusing their discussions on specific events such as first-year orientation. This approach indicates that while ethical principles are acknowledged, they may not be consistently integrated throughout the academic year. For these lecturers, ethical discussions are more episodic and may not be a regular feature of their teaching practice.

Moreover, the study reveals variability in the depth and frequency of ethical instruction across different departments. Some lecturers allocate significant time to discussing ethical issues, providing in-depth exploration and guidance, while others only briefly address the topic, reflecting varying levels of engagement and commitment. This inconsistency in practices underscores a broader lack of uniformity in how ethical education is approached within the academic environment. For instance, studies by Scarfino et al. [53], Beever et al. [54], Marlatt and Korang [55], and Prashar et al. [56] have similarly documented the uneven application of ethical instruction across educational institutions, suggesting that such variability can impact the effectiveness of ethics education.

The variability observed in this study aligns with findings from earlier research, which indicates that differing levels of emphasis on ethics instruction can result in gaps in students' ethical understanding and application [57,58]. Alnajjar and Abou Hashish [57] argue that a lack of standardized ethical training can lead to inconsistent ethical practices among students, while Prisacariu and Shah [58] highlight that brief or superficial coverage of ethics often fails to provide the comprehensive understanding necessary for students to apply ethical principles effectively.

These findings suggest a critical need for a more standardized and systematic approach to integrating ethical principles into the curriculum. By ensuring that ethical education is consistently and comprehensively incorporated across all departments, institutions can enhance the overall effectiveness of ethical training in higher education. Such an approach could address the disparities in ethical instruction and better prepare students to navigate ethical challenges in their professional and personal lives, aligning with recommendations from recent studies advocating for more structured ethics education [39,44,59].

4.4. RQ4

The data displayed in **Figure 4** illustrates the impact of the degree of acceptance of ethical principles on the students. The results revealed that 54.1% of the students were either highly or moderately influenced, while 24.5% claimed that the counseling had only low effects. However, a considerable number of respondents (19.5%) were uncertain if any influence from counseling had an effect on them. This implies that more efforts need to be made to enhance the effectiveness of ethical counseling on students. It is worth mentioning that the percentage of students who reported significant influence is lower than expected, and thus, further research should be conducted to identify possible factors that may hinder the effectiveness of ethical counseling in improving students' ethical inputs.

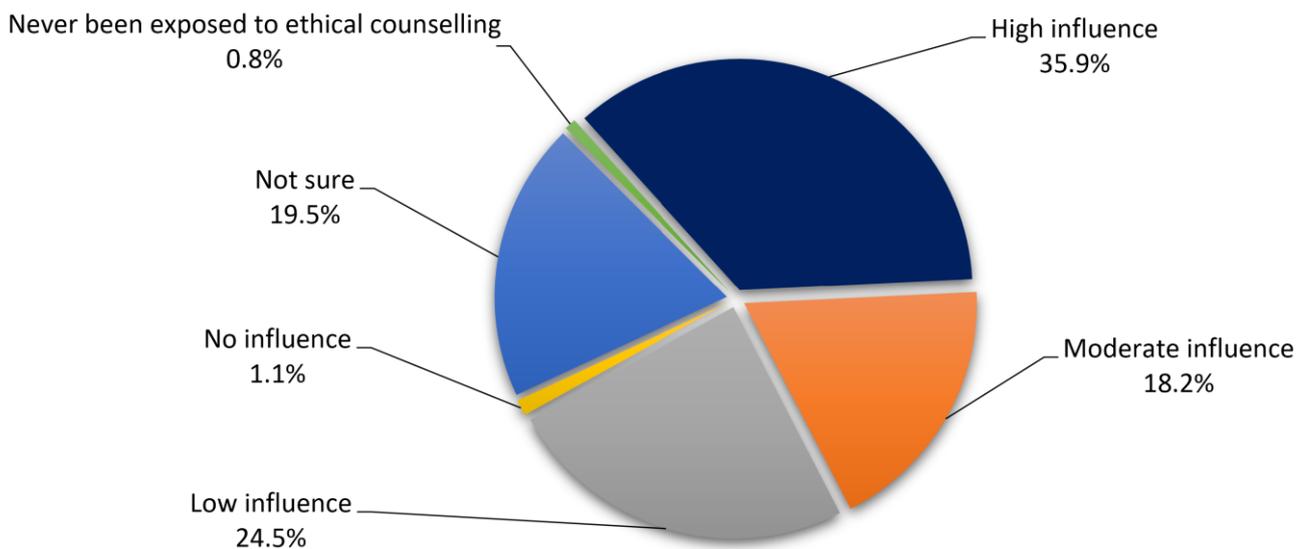


Figure 4. Response to RQ4: What is the degree of acceptance of ethical principles among staff and students in mass communication departments?

The in-depth interviews revealed varying perspectives on the influence and acceptance of ethical principles shared within mass communication departments. Overall, the majority of respondents observed a positive impact of ethical teachings on student behavior, though the extent of this influence differed. Several lecturers noted improvements in specific areas of student conduct, such as reduced instances of cheating, bullying, and disruptive behaviors in the classroom. For instance, one respondent highlighted improvements in daily activities, including students' manners, dress, classroom behavior, and examination conduct. Another mentioned that students often seek their guidance on moral and ethical issues, demonstrating an increasing awareness and acknowledgment of the importance of ethics.

Despite the positive influence of ethical education in mass communication departments, its effectiveness was not universally achieved. This observation is supported by existing literature, which indicates that while ethical training can lead to improvements in behavior, it often encounters limitations in reaching all students uniformly. Some lecturers noted that, despite their diligent efforts to impart ethical principles, certain students continued to engage in unethical behavior. This aligns with research by Joseph et al. [60], who found that even comprehensive ethical training programs sometimes fail to address deeply ingrained behaviors or beliefs, resulting in varied impacts on student conduct.

One respondent highlighted that while some students adhered to the moral guidance provided, others persisted in ignoring these principles. This inconsistency mirrors the findings of Boring and Ottoboni [61] and Blazer and Kraft [62], who argue that ethical education's effectiveness can be inconsistent, largely depending on individual student characteristics and external influences. The study by Ametrano [63] further supports this view, emphasizing that ethical decision-making is influenced by a complex interplay of personal values, social norms, and institutional culture, which may not always align with the ethical teachings provided.

Overall, the study suggests that while ethical education in these departments has led to noticeable improvements in behavior among many students, the impact is not uniform. This reinforces the conclusions of previous studies, which highlight the challenges in achieving consistent ethical behavior across diverse student populations [19,24,46,64]. The findings underscore the need for ongoing and adaptive efforts to reinforce ethical standards and address the varying levels of acceptance among students. This includes tailoring ethical education to address the specific needs and challenges faced by different student groups, as well as continuously updating and improving ethical training programs to ensure their effectiveness across all levels of the academic community.

4.5. RQ5

The data presented in **Figure 5** reveals the prevalence of unethical behavior in mass communication departments. It is evident from the findings that examination malpractice is the most prevalent unethical practice, as reported by 54.1% of the respondents. Tribal consideration and favoritism ranked second among the unethical behaviors reported by 17.5% of the respondents. The third most prevalent unethical behavior was found to be engaging in sexual acts in exchange for grades. These findings demonstrate the need for educational institutions to address these unethical practices and implement policies and programs to prevent them.

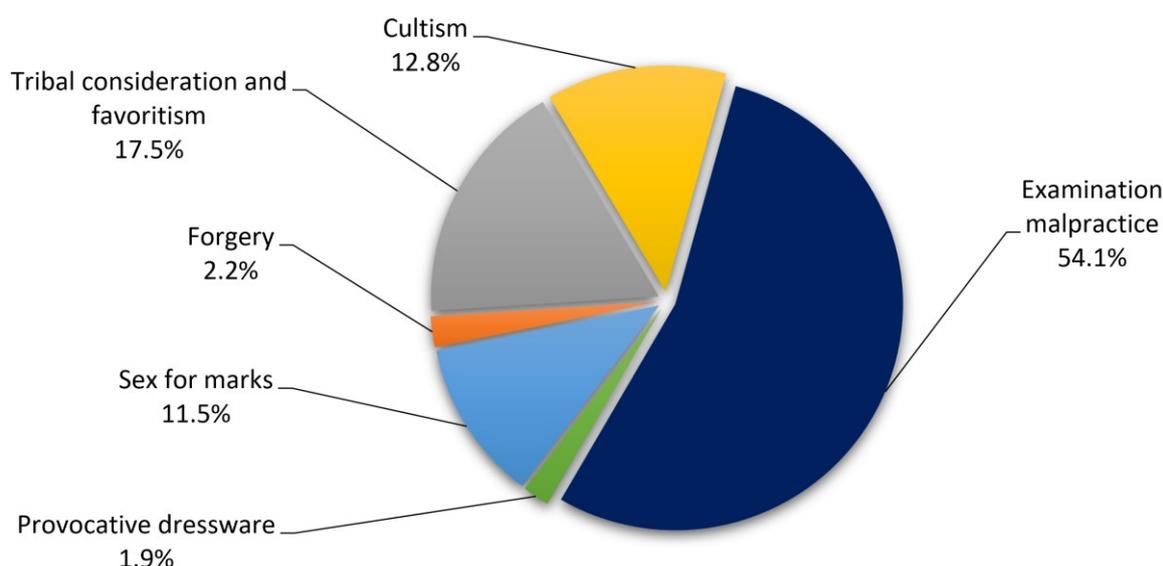


Figure 5. Response to RQ5: What are the most prevalent ethical issues in mass communication departments, including sex for marks, forgery, tribal consideration and favoritism, cultism, and examination malpractice?

The in-depth interviews reveal a range of perspectives on prevalent ethical issues within mass communication departments, highlighting significant concerns and varying experiences across institutions. A common theme emerging from the interviews is the issue of examination malpractice, which is frequently cited as a major ethical problem. Several respondents emphasized that this form of misconduct is a critical challenge, with some indicating that it remains a persistent issue despite efforts to address it. In addition to examination malpractice, there are reports of other ethical

issues such as sexual harassment, favoritism, and extortion. Some respondents noted that while their departments strive to uphold high moral standards, issues like sex for marks and examination misconduct still pose significant problems. The presence of unethical practices such as forced purchases of textbooks and extortion, particularly in certain departments, underscores the need for improved ethical oversight and preventive measures.

Interestingly, perceptions regarding the prevalence of ethical issues vary among respondents. While some reported that their departments maintain high moral standards and effective controls, leading to fewer ethical problems, others noted persistent issues such as examination malpractice and plagiarism. This discrepancy suggests that the visibility and frequency of ethical problems are influenced by the specific departmental environments and institutional controls in place. This variation in perceptions aligns with findings from other studies that highlight similar inconsistencies in the prevalence of unethical behavior across different educational settings. For instance, Egielewa and Adejumo [46] noted that systemic issues within the Nigerian education system, including pervasive cheating, are prevalent despite efforts to improve ethical standards. Similarly, research by Ojo et al. [44] found that variations in institutional practices significantly impact the frequency and type of ethical breaches observed.

The need for more robust ethical guidelines, improved monitoring mechanisms, and a stronger culture of integrity is clear from our findings. These recommendations are consistent with the literature, which emphasizes that comprehensive ethical frameworks and effective enforcement strategies are essential for mitigating unethical behavior [22,45,56,57]. Implementing structured ethical training, enhancing oversight, and fostering an environment that prioritizes integrity are critical steps towards addressing these challenges. By integrating these measures, institutions can work towards creating a more ethical academic environment that better supports the values of integrity and professionalism in mass communication departments.

5. Conclusions

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of ethical awareness, education, and behavior within mass communication departments at selected Nigerian tertiary institutions. Employing a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods, the study investigates five critical research questions: the level of ethical awareness among students and staff, the sources of ethical information, the frequency and effectiveness of ethical counseling, the degree of acceptance of ethical principles, and the prevalence of unethical behavior. The findings offer valuable insights into the state of ethics in Nigerian higher education, particularly within mass communication disciplines.

The study reveals that both students and lecturers generally possess a high level of ethical awareness, with 84.6% of students and all participating lecturers indicating familiarity with ethical principles. This high level of recognition, however, does not necessarily equate to ethical practice. The study uncovers a significant disconnect between ethical awareness and actual behavior. A major concern is that the primary source of ethical information for students is informal conversations with lecturers, with 31.4% of students identifying this as their main source. While these interactions

can foster personal relationships, they highlight the lack of a structured, formal ethical education framework. Ethical counseling, which is vital for shaping students' moral perspectives, appears to be inconsistent and insufficient. Most students reported receiving such guidance only once or twice during their academic careers, usually during first-year orientation. Additionally, 7.1% of students expressed dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of these counseling sessions, indicating a significant gap in the ethical support system.

The findings also reveal that while 54.1% of students reported being either highly or moderately influenced by ethical principles, this level of influence is inadequate to prevent unethical behavior. This observation is consistent with previous research, such as that conducted by Egielewa and Adejumo [46], which identified systemic issues within the Nigerian education system. Their study highlighted that students are frequently exposed to unethical practices from an early age, often through pervasive cheating during national exams in secondary school. This issue reflects a broader trend observed in the Nigerian education system, where systemic problems such as widespread cheating during national exams have become normalized. The persistence of examination malpractice, despite efforts by lecturers to promote ethical behavior, suggests that current approaches to ethics education in Nigerian tertiary institutions are inadequate. The minimal impact of existing ethical classes highlights the need for a fundamental rethinking of how ethics is taught and reinforced within the educational system.

This study raises several critical concerns about the integration of ethics into Nigerian higher education, particularly in mass communication departments. The key issue is the widespread prevalence of unethical behavior, such as examination malpractice, which undermines the integrity of the educational system. Despite high levels of ethical awareness among students and staff, this awareness does not always translate into ethical behavior, revealing a gap between understanding and practice. To address these challenges, the study proposes several recommendations for enhancing the integration of ethics into the educational curriculum. First, ethical education should begin at the primary school level and be integrated throughout all stages of the educational system. Introducing ethics early in students' academic careers will help build a solid moral foundation before they are exposed to environments where unethical behavior may be prevalent. By making ethics a core component of the curriculum from primary through tertiary education, institutions can foster a culture of integrity that students will carry with them throughout their academic and professional lives.

At the tertiary level, particularly within mass communication departments, the study suggests implementing more structured and frequent ethical training sessions. These should move beyond the occasional orientation seminars and include both individual and group counseling tailored to address specific ethical challenges faced by students. Providing regular, formal opportunities for students to engage with ethical issues can help bridge the gap between ethical awareness and ethical action, equipping students with the necessary tools and mindset to handle ethical dilemmas effectively. The role of government and institutional policymakers is also crucial in addressing these issues. Policymakers should collaborate with educational institutions to organize seminars, workshops, and conferences focused on ethics. These events should target

both students and staff, creating platforms for discussing ethical challenges, sharing best practices, and fostering a culture of accountability within the academic community. Institutionalizing these efforts will significantly strengthen the impact of ethical education and promote a more robust ethical framework within the educational system.

In summary, this study underscores the need for a comprehensive, multi-level approach to ethics education in Nigerian higher education. While there is notable ethical awareness, the persistent prevalence of unethical behavior, particularly examination malpractice, indicates that mere awareness is insufficient. To cultivate a more ethically conscious academic environment, it is essential to integrate ethics into the curriculum at all levels, provide ongoing and structured ethical training, and engage in continuous dialogue about ethical issues. These steps are vital for fostering a culture of integrity and reducing the occurrence of unethical practices within Nigeria's educational institutions.

Author contributions: Conceptualization, BFN; methodology BFN and PEE, software, BFN and PEE; validation, BFN and PEE; formal analysis, BFN, PEE and GTC; investigation, BFN, PEE and GTC; resources, BFN, PEE and GTC; data curation, BFN, PEE and GTC; writing—original draft preparation, BFN, PEE and GTC; writing—review and editing, GTC; visualization, GTC; supervision, GTC; project administration, GTC; funding acquisition, GTC. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to a number of research assistants from Edo State University Uzairue, the University of Gdansk, and the University of Pittsburgh for helping us conduct the field work.

Ethics approval: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Gdansk (protocol code PCS-2021-002-GU1002 on 30 September 2021).

Consent to participate: Respondents volunteered to participate autonomously without their identity being recorded. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants in the study via Edo State University Uzairue, Edo State, Nigeria. Consent to participate was voluntary and approved by the Edo State University Uzairue Ethical Committee, Edo State, Nigeria.

Availability of data and materials: The data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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