

# Immorality on Campus: Declining Values Among Students in Higher Education Institutions

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## Abstract

South African society is currently experiencing a breakdown of morals, which is negatively impacting not only communities but also teaching and learning in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). There appears to be a widespread lack of respect for authority, accountability, and good manners among students, who often display rudeness, laziness, dishonesty, and disrespect towards academic staff. These observations indicate a moral crisis in HEIs, which is closely linked to students' reluctance to embrace positive values such as respect, tolerance, obedience, and punctuality. The article aimed to investigate the reasons behind students' display of negative values, focusing on disrespect, dishonesty, and a sense of academic entitlement. Data were gathered through observations and participant interviews, revealing several reasons why students tend to adhere to negative values over positive ones. One recommendation is to introduce values education into university curricula, if not already present. Additionally, universities should explicitly define their values and communicate them to both staff and students, encouraging all parties to work towards restoring moral integrity in HEIs.

**Keywords:** values, moral relativism, immorality, moral crisis, academic entitlement

## 1. Introduction

Globally, values are under threat because societies, including South African society, are increasingly becoming morally corrupt. This moral decay is evident in, amongst others, educational institutions such as schools and universities (Fayokun, Adedeji, & Oyebade, 2009; Joseph & Berry, 2010). Several factors contribute to the moral decay of societies, one of which seems to be the inability to exhibit positive values. Since schools and HEIs form part of the broader, morally decaying society, it is not surprising that some learners and students also often do not adhere to positive values. Instead, they display negative values such as disrespect, dishonesty, laziness, rudeness, impoliteness, and lack of good manners (Njoku, 2016; Priscariu & Shah, 2016). This value crisis or value dilemma has negative implications for teaching and learning in HEIs. Lecturers are often threatened, bullied, and intimidated by students. In addition, students often arrive late for classes and appointments, talk back to, and argue with lecturers, swear at lecturers, cheat during assessments, plagiarise their assessments and increasingly display a sense of academic entitlement (Van der Walt, 2003; Luckett, Trocchia, Noel, & Marlin, 2017). For example, they often do not submit assignments but expect to be awarded marks or demand countless second chances to redo assignments. Many are also guilty of examination malpractice or academic misconduct such as cheating during assessments (Luckett, Trocchia, Noel, & Marlin, 2017; Ute, 2014; Abdulkareem & Alabi, 2004). Online assessments make it especially easy for students to claim to have submitted assignments, knowing full well that they did not. One reason students cheat so easily with online assessments is that, in most cases, there is no one to invigilate. They also often submit assessment tasks late citing 'technical problems' as an excuse. Dishonesty and cheating have become the order of the day (Smith, 2021; Newton, 2016; Lawal & Ali, 2017). Higher education in South Africa has become increasingly diverse, pluralistic, and inclusive. Diversity in culture, language, values, and socio-economic status can be seen clearly in many contemporary classrooms across HEIs. Diversity, multicultural, and inclusive education are not necessarily adverse. However, when students from different cultures and value systems are grouped or merged, this can lead to value conflicts and cultural clashes (Stiles, Wong, & LaBeff, 2017; Tchatchoueng, 2014). That is because different cultures prioritise different values—what is immoral and unacceptable for one cultural group may be morally acceptable for another. This study aimed to determine the causes of student immorality by focusing on their display of dishonesty, including academic dishonesty, disrespect,

and a sense of entitlement. The problem of student immorality needs to be addressed because it has negative implications for teaching and learning, lecturer morale, and for healthy pedagogical relationships between lecturers and students. Intervention is necessary at this point before it is too late—some might think that it is already too late (Joseph & Berry, 2010; Smith, 2021; Lawal & Ali, 2017).

## 2. Related Literature

### 2.1 Immorality Among Students

Immorality is the violation of moral laws, norms, or standards and can manifest in different ways, for example stealing, lying, murdering, unfaithfulness, and dishonesty. It is often the result of a general decline in positive values, such as respect (for one another and authority), loyalty, altruism, honesty, and compassion. Many students in HEIs lack moral substance as a result of society's apparent moral deficiency (Smith, 2021; Van Heerden-Pieterse, 2015; Joseph, Berry, & Deshpande, 2010). When immorality becomes part of a group's pattern, it is often perceived as an act of freedom—a license to do as one pleases (Joseph, Berry, & Deshpande, 2010; Readings, 1996). Students sometimes dress indecently and provocatively, manhandle lecturers, and gossip about them. Samson and Allida (2018) aver that the decline of morals in and out of schools is a global phenomenon. The immorality of students could be caused by:

- (social) media influence
- poor parental care
- peer pressure
- everybody doing it
- spiritual problems
- psychological or personal problems
- fading values
- a weak moral background from home (Fayokun, Adedeji, & Oyebade, 2009; Van der Walt, 2003).

As previously stated, some students are dishonest, disrespectful to lectures, think they are (academically) entitled, and that they can do as they please. Academic entitlement is generally defined as the desire to receive more from one's academic experiences than one gives to it (Readings, 1996; Miller, 2013). Singh (2018) asserts that, in many educational institutions around the world, there is no adherence to fundamental values. Students are often rude to lecturers, they lie to lecturers about other lecturers, steal other students' assessments and submit them as their own, steal lecturers' and other people's possessions, and some students have even been physical with lecturers. Cheating, plagiarism, unethical research, corruption in examinations, and the lack of ethics curricula give students the impression that this is how the world functions. Academic dishonesty among students is also perpetuated by online teaching and assessments which make it easy for them to cheat (Miller, 2013; Arshad, Zahid, Umer, Khan, Sarki, & Yaseen, 2021).

### 2.2 Culture, Values, and Morality

The study of values and morality has long been important in education, psychology, and philosophy. Even in ancient times, values and their significance for societies were of interest to philosophers such as Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato (Louw, 2009). Values are the ideals or beliefs that guide or qualify society or a subgroup's conduct and interaction with others. They help us to distinguish right from wrong and inform us how to conduct our lives in a meaningful way (Louw, 2009; Solomons & Fataar, 2011). In other words, they are the basic, fundamental beliefs that guide or motivate our attitudes and actions. The concepts of values, morals, and principles are often used interchangeably. Defined as the societal norms and values to which a certain group of people ascribes and that are passed down from generation to generation, culture is usually a broad concept that means different things to different people (Louw, 2009; Saroja, 2016; Idang, 2015; Awoniyi, 2015). Communities generally identify themselves through certain common features such as shared values. Thus, a social group of people who share patterns of behaviour, values and beliefs is said to belong to the same culture. We may, therefore, speak of Indian, African, Asian, or Arab cultures. There may be sub-cultures that represent variations in the common patterns of living exhibited by different, widely spread communities of each of these cultures (Tchatchoueng, 2014; Seroto, 2015). Interpretations of what is moral or immoral are influenced by the norms of a particular culture, and different cultures can have different beliefs about what is wrong or right and what is acceptable or unacceptable. According to moral (or ethical relativism) cultures thus reflect the moral and ethical beliefs that speak to how people should behave and interact with others, despite having different beliefs. If these different value systems are not communicated and addressed, they can often lead to culture shock, intercultural miscommunication, and

misunderstanding (Ariyanthi, 2016). Mariaye (2006) asserts that although morality is a concept that different people use differently, it is generally concerned with the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour. Therefore, it refers to behaviour that is deemed acceptable by societies.

### *2.3 Moral Relativism Versus Moral Absolutism*

Within the branches of anthropology and axiology, ethics is defined as the study of morality or moral values. Two of the main theories of morality are absolutism and relativism (Weist, 2016). Moral absolutism, a philosophy, claims that all people must adhere to universal values. It is in contrast with moral relativism which denies the existence of absolute moral values. As such, moral relativism can be understood in various ways. Most often, it is associated with the notion that there are deep and widespread moral disagreements and the meta-ethical thesis that the truth or justification of moral judgements is not absolute but relative to the moral standard of an individual or group (Adarkwa, 2021). Weist (2016) contends that moral absolutism is a universal principle of morality that consists of a set of common standards and values for ethical reasoning. It dictates that being equally valid in all places at all times, regardless of culture or religion, values should apply universally. These norms are seen as basic ethical standards such as honesty, loyalty, respect, and love. Thus, according to moral absolutism, there are absolute, universally moral laws that guide human nature, decisions, and behaviour (Adarkwa, 2021). This implies that there are values that are common among different cultures. Respect for others, for example, is a value that is embraced in most cultures. The difference often lies in how this respect is shown. With so many different cultural groups at different HEIs, which values should prevail? Which culture's values should be practised? The challenge with moral or cultural relativism is the moral disagreement often experienced amongst different cultures—what is morally right and acceptable for one culture can be morally wrong and unacceptable for another (Adarkwa, 2021).

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

This study was informed by social reconstructionism. According to this philosophy, education must strive to produce learners and students who will act justly and morally in social situations (Frye & Davis, 1999; Sutinen, 2014). The philosophy emphasises that social and moral questions should be addressed. It is a quest to solve social problems to create better societies. Social reconstructionists claim that education can play a great role in understanding social problems and striving to find solutions to these problems. Social reconstructionism does not seek to impose a society's values on the individual, nor does the individual have to tread a lonely and solitary path toward self-discovery. The individual and society are seen as mutually beneficial in the process of social transformation. Social reconstruction is thus seen as a vehicle for social transformation through education, bearing in mind that certain things in society are worth preserving (Frye & Davis, 1999; Sutinen, 2014).

## **4. Method**

### *4.1 Research Design*

Phenomenology, as a research design, examines social experiences through the descriptions provided by the people involved (Van Wyk & Taole, 2015). The social experiences are called the lived experiences of the participants in the study. The researcher selected hermeneutical phenomenology (or interpretative research) to gain knowledge through the subjective experiences of the participants. Hermeneutical phenomenology claims that interpretations are all we have and description itself is an interpretative process. Hermeneutics is a philosophy that is used to make sense of textual data (Henning, Van Rensburg, & Smit, 2004). Interpretative research was selected because its purpose is to bring light and reflect upon the lived meaning of the participants' experiences through careful listening. Listening is thus an important cornerstone of interpretative research. The participants' experiences were described as they appear in their everyday lives before they have been theorised, interpreted, explained, and otherwise abstracted. Understanding the social world of the participants involves getting 'inside' their social world (Henning, Van Rensburg, & Smit, 2004; Nieuwenhuis, 2007).

### *4.2 Data Collection Methods*

The primary research question of this study was: "What are the reasons for the non-adherence to positive values amongst students in HEIs?" To answer this question, data were collected through two methods, namely observations and interviews. One hundred and eighty B.Ed students were observed in their natural environment (during lectures, meetings, and when they would come for consultations). The observations took place over one year. Observation is an essential data-gathering technique as it enables the researcher to gain a deeper insight and understanding of the phenomenon being observed. It allows us to see, hear, and experience the realities of participants (Mouton, 1996; Nieuwenhuis, 2007; Chitiyo, Taukeni, & Chitiyo, 2015). For this reason, data do not have to be presented in statistics because statistical analysis is generally associated with quantitative research. Qualitative research seeks to study *the qualities* of phenomena rather than the *quantities* (Creswell, 2014). The

researcher mainly teaches and interacts with first to third-year students who study Education—these students were the population. The students were observed covertly because they were unaware that they were being observed. The researcher thus took on the role of non-participant observer because she did not participate in the students' activities and actions. She looked, listened, and made notes of their comments without getting involved. Observations were followed up with individual and semi-structured focus group interviews with students. Convenience sampling was employed for the interviews. Participants were selected based on availability and their willingness to participate in the research. Each focus group consisted of six to ten students. One reason for opting for semi-structured interviews is because they are flexible and allow for probing and follow-up questions. Twenty-eight students were interviewed individually. The interviews (individual and focus group) were conducted over two months and were recorded with a cellular phone. Questions that were asked included students' opinions about ethical behaviour, their understanding of values and culture, their reasons for often prioritising negative values, their knowledge of university policies, and their knowledge of the institution's values.

#### 4.3 Data-Analysis Methods

Qualitative content analysis was employed through the identification of themes that emerged during the interviews. It is a method for analysing qualitative data that entails searching across data to identify, analyse, interpret, and report responses. It is a method for describing data, but it also involves interpretation in the process of selecting codes and constructing themes (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). Qualitative data aim to describe and make meaning of phenomena and thus do not require quantification of texts and statistical analysis (Creswell, 2014). Content analysis was used to interpret the responses to identify dimensions or themes. In content analysis, the researcher has many options on how to convert 'raw' data to final patterns of meaning. The researcher opted for qualitative coding and categorising of themes. Meanings were thus conveyed in terms of themes (Henning, Van Rensburg, & Smit, 2004; Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). A hierarchical approach was used to analyse the data, building from the bottom to the top (Creswell, 2014; Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). Figure 1 and Table 1 below illustrate how the data were analysed.

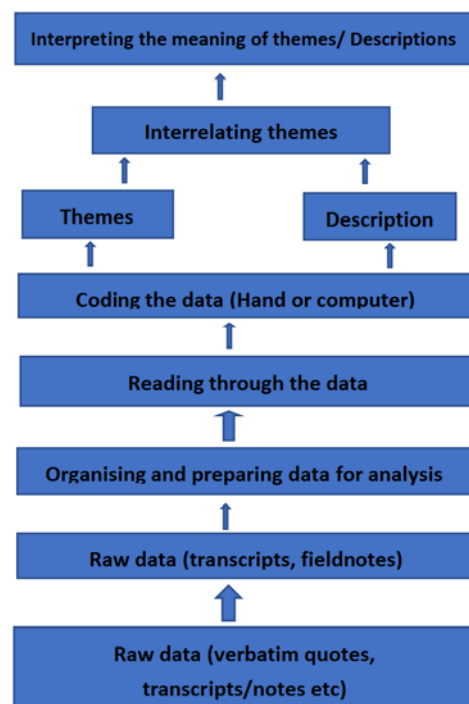


Figure 1. Steps used for qualitative content analysis: Adapted from Creswell (2014)

Table 1. Steps in qualitative data analysis (Nieuwenhuis, 2007; Creswell, 2014)

Steps	Data Analysis
Step 1	Observing students by listening to them and taking fieldnotes. The researcher listened to the recordings she made during the interviews and read through the notes. (Some observations were of recordings that were made during online classes through Blackboard).
Step 2	After reading and listening, the researcher attempted to get a general sense or overview of what the participants were saying. The interviews were transcribed for further analysis by converting them to texts.
Step 3	The third step entailed the time-consuming process of interpreting and coding (by hand) the data, which is the process of organising the data by bracketing chunks (or texts) into themes or categories.
Step 4	Once coding was complete, the data were examined to find patterns, from which the researcher identified the themes. E.g., from what the participants were saying, the researcher extrapolated the theme of dishonesty. Different coloured highlighters were used to highlight common, recurring themes. Inductive reasoning was employed because the themes emerged from the fieldnotes and responses of the participants.
Step 5	The next step was to interpret and describe the data and cohesively present the themes.
Step 6	The final steps were to draw conclusions from the data and to report the findings.

The following themes emerged during the observations and interviews: dishonesty, academic or self-entitlement, and disrespectful behaviour.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

### 5.1 Findings During Observations

Below are a few of the remarks that the researcher observed that were uttered by students.

Table 2. Participants' remarks during observations

Theme	Participants' Responses
Dishonesty	P1: "Did you see the student who wrote answers on her hands during the test?" This response indicates that some students cheat by behaving dishonestly.
Entitlement	P2: "When are you guys going to fix my marks?" (You guys refers to the lecturers. The student also wanted wrong answers to be marked correct). Students feel they are entitled to be awarded marks they do not deserve or earn.
Disrespect	P3: "That lecturer does not know what she's doing". P4: "What do white people know about black people? They don't know how we do things in African culture. J...s. That Mrs X is too white. This is a black university. Blacks come late." The comment from P3 is indicative of how students often disrespect and insult lecturers. P4's comment indicates that the students feel that white lecturers do not know how things are done in black culture - it speaks to cultural differences. If the university policy states that students should not arrive late for class then they should adhere to the policy, irrespective of their race.

Observation notes are never complete, and the researcher captured them as soon as possible. Some of the comments were captured on computers during online teaching, some were sent to academic staff via emails by students. These observations are indicative of students' disrespect, academic misconduct, and academic entitlement. The comment made by P4 indicates that different cultural groups often do not prioritise the same values. These observations are what motivated the study.

### 5.2 Findings During Interviews

The observations were followed by interviews. One of the questions participants were asked was: "What is your understanding of values?"

Most of them did not know what values are. Instead, they responded by giving examples of values rather than definitions. These were some of the responses:

P5: "Values are like honesty, things such as we must not steal."

P6: "Values..., ma'am I think... yes. It's like she said. We must not steal. We must not lie."

P7: "Respect is also a value, Doctor."

#### Theme 1: Academic dishonesty

The students were asked why they sometimes behave dishonestly. The researcher referred to examples such as cheating during assessments, lying, and falsifying documents.

The researcher asked the question: “*Who has ever falsified documents?*” Some participants admitted to having done so. A follow-up question was asked as to why they did that. Two participants responded as follows:

*P8: “I did not have money to go to the doctor, so I took a friend’s medical certificate, tipp-exed her name, and put my name on it. I heard from other students that they did that in the past and nothing happened to them.”*

*P9: “I once submitted an assignment late, but I told the lecturer I submitted it on time. I really didn’t think the lecturer would find out because she said she was going to be away.”*

Stiles, Wong, and Labeff (2017) concede that academic dishonesty has become so normative that it is no longer viewed by students as deviant behaviour that needs justification. According to Miller (2013) it is a problem that is identified internationally in HEIs.

### **Theme 2: Disrespect**

Students display disrespect in a variety of ways. They address lecturers by their first names, they arrive late for classes, and they are rude. Below is a comment made by a student during an online teaching session.

*P10: “The lecturers are so f...g confused when answering these questions. These people are just so confused.”*

When the researcher asked students why they do not respect lecturers, this was one of the responses:

*P11: “It’s not that we don’t respect them, ma’am. It’s just how we talk. Everyone talks like that. Especially us young people when we hang out, even when we were at school - we talked like that. Older people should really move with the times if they don’t wanna stay behind.”*

The comment uttered by P11 suggests that some of the undesirable behaviours had already started at school level.

### **Theme 3: Academic entitlement**

Students are often entitled to certain things and want the freedom to do as they please. One example is that students want to be ‘given’ examination questions, rather than working hard and studying. They claim that they do not have time to study, or that the work is difficult and too much. Students generally think that they should not be punished if they are found guilty of plagiarism and/or cheating during assessments.

The question asked was: “*You are often referred to as the entitled generation. Do you agree or disagree?*”

*P12: “We’re not entitled. But we need things. We need cellphones and money. And some lecturers are stingy with marks. I cannot afford to fail.”*

*P13: “We have so many tests to write, sometimes we write three tests in one day. That is why we feel we have to cheat sometimes during tests. We don’t have the time to study for three tests in one day. Why don’t lecturers just give us the questions they’re gonna ask? It’s not like they don’t know.”*

*P14: “The lecturers must give us scopes so that we know what to study. Ma’am, lecturers were also students once. I’m sure they got scopes. Some teachers gave us scopes when we were at school.”* (A scope is a summary of work that needs to be studied).

The findings from the observations and the interviews indicate that there is a moral decline or moral deficit in values among some students. These findings seem to be supported by the literature. For example, Smith (2021) and Stiles et al. (2017) observe that the youth are more selfish, superficial, narcissistic, dishonest, and entitled than at any other time. Van der Walt (2003) concedes that academics are worried by the moral vacuum and moral decline in South Africa and HEIs. He continues to state that it seems something important has disappeared and nothing good has replaced it. During the interviews, many of the participants claimed that they display unacceptable behaviour because that is what they know, and they seem to think everybody behaves the way they do. They thus have justification for their behaviour. Their immoral reasoning is translated into their immoral actions and behaviour. Lawal and Ali (2017) state that there is a breakdown in societal cultural and value systems. The moral breakdown is evident from the participants’ responses. This breakdown seems to start at schools and continues at the tertiary level. The findings are supported by Rogers and Sizer (2010) when they state that many schools in South Africa are depicted as sites where disrespect and racial intolerance proliferate. Rogers and Sizer (2010) summarise this breakdown by stating that many people are surprised at the violations of ethics that are seen in the educational world. These violations include engaging in inappropriate behaviour to get ahead and the inappropriate use of university equipment.

## **6. Limitations of Qualitative Research**

Phenomenology was selected as a research design because the researcher thought it was best to study the participants in their natural setting where she could identify the essence of their human or lived experiences.

However, qualitative research has limitations. Some of the limitations are illustrated in the table below.

Table 3. Adapted from Henning, Van Rensburg, and Smit (2004); Chitiyo, Taukeni, and Chitiyo (2015); Creswell (2014)

Observations	Interviews
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Private information may be observed that the researcher cannot report or divulge.</li> <li>The researcher may not have good attending and observing skills.</li> <li>Data may be difficult to interpret.</li> <li>Sometimes the observer cannot tell why certain actions happen the way they do, or why certain people behave the way they do.</li> <li>The quality of data collected from observations, to a large extent, depends on the researcher's level of competence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews sometimes provide indirect information filtered through the views of the interviewer.</li> <li>Not all participants are equally articulate and perceptive.</li> <li>The researcher's presence may bias responses.</li> <li>Information is provided in a designated place rather than the natural field setting.</li> <li>Dishonest practices may crop up where the participants may hide useful information.</li> <li>Some participants may not be open or frank enough for fear of victimisation.</li> <li>It may be difficult to interpret data.</li> </ul>

## 7. Recommendations

Based on the findings and the literature review, the following recommendations are made:

- Moral education should be integrated into the curriculum to teach students about values. The question arises as to whose values should be prioritised and for what reasons. Ideally, the values of all cultural groups should be taught and understood. Certain values such as hard work and self-discipline can help students to become hard-working and disciplined, regardless of their cultural background.
- The values of the institution should be upheld, regardless of people's cultural background. These values must be demonstrated in people's behaviour and actions. Constitutional values should also be imparted to students, and these values must be upheld by all citizens, irrespective of their personal value systems.
- Moral education should be an internal goal of education, as HEIs and schools are responsible for producing citizens who uphold positive values in their communities.
- Academic staff and students must have an open mind and be willing to examine and possibly change their value systems. This does not mean that people must discard or forget their values.
- Each culture and its values should be embraced, valued, and respected, provided those values are not harmful to others.
- Stereotyping, xenophobia, bias, discrimination, and prejudice should be avoided. All cultures should be treated equally.
- To maintain a healthy pedagogical relationship, students and lecturers should be tolerant of diversity to avoid resistance. Teaching and learning will be easier if different cultures have some knowledge about other cultures.
- We must learn to appreciate diversity because it often helps us deal better with change and understand others better.
- To create and maintain public trust in universities amid today's complexities and uncertainty, universities need to define their values and policies explicitly, clearly communicate them to staff, students, and stakeholders, and demonstrate that their values and policies inform best practices and good decision-making.

Further studies can be conducted with teachers, lecturers, and other staff members at HEIs to determine their perceptions of learner and student immorality.

## 8. Conclusion

The findings, which seem to be corroborated by literature, indicate that immorality amongst students is widespread. Often, students want things to be handed to them on a silver platter and do not value positive values such as hard work, honesty, accountability, good manners, and respect. The lack of ethics among students is a disconcerting that needs to be addressed by HEIs. Teaching values is not an easy task, but unethical behaviour and values education deserve more attention in HEIs. Moral education by schools, communities, and HEIs is important because it prepares (or at best is supposed to prepare) children to become well-rounded, responsible adults. The

ethical and moral values practised at universities heavily influence future leaders, employers, employees, and communities. The goal of educational institutions is to impart knowledge and skills, but they should also impart character and values to students so that they are adequately prepared for the labour market as well as cope with the uncertainties of life (Luckett, Trocchia, Noel, & Marlin, 2017). For teaching and learning to take place harmoniously in HEIs, people of different cultures need to find ways to co-exist and respect one another, despite their differences.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

**Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

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