

# Examining the Role of Anti-Corruption Training Courses at South African Universities: Any Lessons for Africa?

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## ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of university courses in anti-corruption strategies and is based on the argument that universities should be key stakeholders in strengthening the fight against corruption in Africa. To this aim, the researchers, employing the qualitative empirical paradigm, examined the opinions and knowledge of seasoned university and civil organization researchers on the importance of university-based anti-corruption training. The focus was on the relevance for South African higher education institutions, its students, and the country, including both private and public sectors. The participating researchers explored what would guarantee a successful training initiative by identifying the most important topics, themes, realities, and challenges. In addition, the question of whether a generic anti-corruption training initiative throughout the African continent would be successful was also asked. While there were minor differences of viewpoints and opinions, most participants believed that university-based anti-corruption training could play a central role in the fight against corruption on all levels and they provided motivation for their views. The findings of this unique study contribute to the notion that universities are key stakeholders in fighting corruption, and that a corruption-conscious curriculum is central in the battle against endemic malfeasance.

**Key words:** corruption, South Africa, anti-corruption strategies, Africa, universities, ethical training, public sector.

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## Introduction

The African Union declared that universities should be one of the leading institutions in the fight against and combating the scourge of corruption in society throughout the African continent. The African Union's and African Union Advisory Board against Corruption (AUABC) declaration of 11 July as the African Anti-Corruption Day was hailed as a ray of hope for continental leadership. This gave rise to the optimistic belief that universities could become instrumental in the fight against widespread corruption in society (AUABC 2023). At many levels, there was a new belief that universities could become instrumental in the forthcoming fight against corruption in society and against an acknowledged scourge in both the public and private sectors. However, despite the established argument that universities have a strong potential role to play in the fight against corruption, universities have not put much effort into studying corruption or capacitating graduates to deal with corruption. While universities are expected and encouraged to study corruption and to be the moral voice against corruption, in South Africa, there is emerging disturbing evidence that corruption and chronic dysfunction at universities are becoming normalised (Jansen 2023; Naidu 2023; Ngcamu et al. 2022).

It is common knowledge that corruption in Africa has increased at a 'devastating level' to the extent that the African Union has pointed out that such a reality steals the future of the continent (Mhaka 2022). The challenges of such a multifaceted phenomenon have led most continental governments to seriously consider, plan and implement ways and means in anti-corruption policies and actions as it has become evident that corruption has increased in most countries with only few exceptions. According to Transparency International (2019), 55% of all citizens believed that corruption had increased while only 23% thought it had decreased.

Only 34% of interviewees believed that their governments were fighting honestly and consistently to combat corruption, while 59% indicated poor attempts in this regard. In countries such as Sudan, Madagascar and Gabon, the negative opinions of interviewees were higher than 80%.

Transparency International (2019) further states that the Democratic Republic of the Congo had the highest bribery rate at 80%, while Mauritius boasts the lowest of 5%, followed by Botswana and Cape Verde Islands with 7% and 8% respectively. Only 28% of the population had access to education and health care and expected to pay bribes for access to these key public facilities. Such realities are due to the dishonesty and lack of integrity of public officials, with the police regarded as highly corrupt (Transparency International, 2019).

In numerous respects, the primary source of optimism stemmed from the confidence that the African Union was determined to win the battle that would lead to the ratification of key decisions, plans and implementation of honest governance and transparency. This arduous journey was seen as a path toward a profound ethical transformation. A book by the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) on the effectiveness of anti-corruption agencies in Southern Africa has shown empirically that the existing state efforts throughout this important area of Africa and the efforts against corruption have failed (OSISA, 2017).

Within this context there can be no doubt that the research produced by academics, journalists, and civil society organisations have contributed to broadening society's knowledge about the importance of honesty, ethical behaviour, and transparency. For these knowledge inputs to be effective, the transformation of public officials and the public sector's good governance arrangements need to be overhauled. This should include positive changes of the leadership, key parties, their behaviour, beliefs, roles and actions. The role of top and middle management is of critical importance as well as they should demonstrate correct attitude, solid knowledge, expertise, experience, and know-how as key elements of the anti-corruption initiative (Woods et al, 2012).

It is within this context that this paper highlights the importance of universities in Africa, and South Africa in particular, in undertaking anti-corruption research and training. It is vitally important for the leadership of African universities to research, prepare and present relevant anti-corruption course materials in the fight against corruption. Such training should be grounded in a well-planned, designed, and implemented curriculum that is instrumental in deepening, strengthening, as well as adding strategic and technical anti-corruption methods and robust strategies.

In this paper, we argue that the key function of anti-corruption training courses at institutions of higher learning is to lay a solid foundation by equipping public officials and the public sector with transformative and effective strategies to safeguard state resources and public trust. We argue that such training initiatives should begin with anti-corruption education of tertiary students who will eventually find themselves in the public or private sector. The central role and responsibility of the tertiary institution is to facilitate effective teaching, learning and research to enhance comprehensive understanding of the realities of corruption, acquisition of knowledge and the practical skills that lead towards discovery and critical analysis of fraud and corruption practices. This article, by focusing on the anti-corruption course content offered by universities, builds on emerging literature on corruption in general, but more specifically, the potential role of universities to strengthen the fight against corruption.

### **Literature Review**

In its fight against corruption, the African Union declared 2018 as the year of anti-corruption on 11<sup>th</sup> July. The continental organisation declared that universities should be some of the leading institutions in the fight and combating of the scourge of corruption in societies throughout the African Continent and within all institutions. In her statement on the 20th Annual Global Child Nutrition Forum, and CESA Home Grown School Feeding Cluster Meeting, Sara Agbor, the African Union Commissioner for Human Resources, Science and Technology, provides a comprehensive analysis of the repercussions of corruption in the political, economic, and social sectors, including universities (African Union 2018). She gave a comprehensive analysis on the repercussions of corruption in the political, economic, and social sectors, including universities. The African Union (2018) noted that universities are called to be in the 'fight for winning the fight against corruption', thus creating a 'sustainable path to Africa's transformation'. The crucial importance of defeating corruption at universities is the starting point for all tertiary education training programs aiming at researching, building, analysing developing the fight against corruption and empowering the continent.

According to the Head of the Science and Technology of the African Union, Mahama Ouedraogo, the African anti-corruption struggle is in the hands of the continent's universities. The universities are described as the key role players in the continuous process of instilling ethical behaviour, honesty, and transparency in students for purposes of the continent's social and economic development. For these efforts to be successful, it will be imperative for the teaching and training on corruption, as well as moral and ethical relations, to be founded on

traditional African knowledge systems and traditions, as African university students are custodians of the continent's future.

A prominent African academic and President of the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNi-Africa), Peter Okebukola (2016) stated that there is an urgent need for African universities to prepare courses, which will include mandatory anti-corruption methods in the curricula and analyse the realities and dimensions of corruption. Students, communities, public administration, and the private sector should be trained in critical analysis of corruption, its effect on African development and how to combat it. In particular, social sciences and law schools should develop reflections on well-researched methods of detection and stoppage of corruption. This could lead to the documentation and distribution of successful cases to address the fight against corruption effectively (Okebukola 2016).

In South Africa, 29 years since the advent of democracy, endemic corruption by politicians and administrators at all levels of government in both public and private sectors, continues to dominate the headlines. The highly publicised 'Sarafina scandal' in 1996 under then President Mandela, the 'arms deal' under then President Mbeki, the 'state capture' under then President Zuma and the Eskom scandals under current President Ramaphosa, are some of the international headlines that put a spotlight on corruption in South Africa. However, the realities of corrupt activities that systematically loot public funds and resources are now a daily occurrence for the country with supply chain mismanagement, administrative nepotism and bribery topping the list (Mantzaris 2018).

It is within this context that South African and African universities' active participation in anti-corruption educational initiatives needs to be explored as a matter of urgency. The very first university anti-corruption and ethics training programme in Africa was offered in 2010 at Stellenbosch University in South Africa by the Anti-Corruption Centre for Education and Research (ACCERUS) under the School of Public Leadership. Professor Gavin Woods led the development of thoroughly researched training programmes, based on theoretical and empirical research from both international and African perspectives. The programme was well structured and designed to impact awareness, skills, research-based knowledge, and strategies necessary to introduce and enforce effective anti-corruption training for both public and private sector organisations.

As part of the School of Public Leadership (SPL), ACCERUS aspired to teach wide ranging and high-level public sector management knowledge and skills to government officials, both at an undergraduate and post graduate level. Throughout the years, ACCERUS offered accredited training course material in national and international seminars, and for conferences in collaboration with several relevant international bodies and foreign institutions. The programmes were based on thorough analysis of relevant South African and international legislation, financial accounting and management systems as well as investigation and audit methods. It also incorporated governance and ethics practices, including a wide range of existing anti-corruption approaches. The programmes aimed to develop and promote higher levels of integrity, probity and best practice in governments, emphasizing the appropriate use of public resources.

A comparison of two anti-corruption courses at South African universities points to similar topics and themes but with differences in the target groups. The course at the University of South Africa (UNISA) targets commercial crime and anti-corruption investigators in both public and private sectors specifically. The topics broadly covered are legal procedures for anti-corruption and commercial crime investigations while the sub-topics focus on, amongst others, South African commercial crime, property crimes, and crimes against the administration of justice. The law of evidence, delict, and principles of civil law, as well as statutory mandates to investigate are also explored. Under the umbrella of operationalisation resorts basic scene handling, search and seizure procedures, engaging witnesses, and suspects, as well as garnering affidavits and statement recordings. Specific legislation that participants are expected to engage in includes the Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act, the Interception of Communications Act, the National Prosecuting and Witness Protection Act, as well as the Electronic Communications and Transactions Act (UNISA no date).

The second training programme is an online course in anti-corruption and procurement fraud focusing on business practitioners in the private sector and offered by the University of Pretoria. The primary rationale behind the introduction of the program is the conviction that businesspeople, companies, and entrepreneurs should uphold the principles of responsible corporate citizenship. The program proposes that the lack of formal regulation demands that the private sector is obligated to take ownership for the management of procurement fraud and expected to manage corruption risks effectively and efficiently. The key training themes address the extent and human element of corruption within the context of South Africa's legal regime and the impact on it from the legal regimes of both the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom. It also covers procurement fraud schemes and whistle blowing (University of Pretoria, *undated*)

Both training programmes underscore the critical role of honesty and ethical conduct in human relationships in general with emphasis on business relationships. The omission of the role of conduct in the fight against

corruption has been scrutinised on both international and local forums (Mafunisa 2002, 2008; Mantzaris 2013, 2018; Mle 2012; Pickus 2002; Pritchard 2000).

Reflecting on these two programmes offered at universities in South Africa it is evident that they have not been designed, or aimed at the student body at large, but primarily for stakeholders outside the university who have an interest in anti-corruption. This confirms the lack of anti-corruption training and awareness programs embedded in the curricula at institutions of higher learning.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative, in-depth interviews were conducted with six (6) selected participating researchers who commanded a comprehensive understanding of both universities and corruption, as well as the existing and future interplay between them. The questions focused on the knowledge, understanding, opinions and beliefs of these participants regarding anti-corruption in their spheres of employment. Thus, the empirical methodology employed in the study adhered to an interpretive framework, guiding the process toward theory development.

The participants were employed, amongst others, in university public management faculties, senior government positions at the Department of Public Service and Administration and Higher Education and Training, while others held executive leadership positions with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and in business. Participants were well informed regarding the existing realities of the anti-corruption terrain in South Africa, Africa and internationally, including the strengths and weaknesses of corruption prevention. In addition, selection was based on their firsthand experience of anti-corruption efforts at university level and how well versed they were in politics affecting those initiatives.

The key questions that were posed to the study participants were the following:

1. *Is university-based anti-corruption training important for institutions, countries, private and public sectors, and students? Please provide the reasons for your answer/s.*
2. *What do you consider the most important topics, themes, realities, challenges and problems that should be foundations of success in such an initiative? Please provide the reasons for your answer/s.*
3. *Knowing the South African and African corruption realities do you feel that a 'generic anti-corruption training initiative' throughout the African continent would be successful? Please provide the reasons for your answer/s.*

The importance of ethical principles was demonstrated by receiving informed consent from interviewees. Participants were informed about the study topic, the research questions and processes. The aims, objectives and implications of the project were also explained. Confidentiality of the qualitative interviews was maintained throughout the research process, and participants were assured that their identities would not be revealed (Bell, Harley and Bryman 2022). Once the interviews were completed, non-probability, purposive sampling principles were applied, and the interviews were transcribed and analysed. The use of the qualitative analysis software program NVivo version 12 (Wong 2008) produced theme and topics generation.

### **Findings and Analysis of Data**

#### ***The importance of anti-corruption training at universities***

The central finding was that most participants believed universities throughout the continent have a crucial role to play in the anti-corruption drive through the advancement of awareness and knowledge, aimed at the students and the private and public sectors, with special emphasis on the latter.

The shared sentiment was that teaching, researching and training at universities would be a 'major contribution' in driving the processes of economic and social development and solving corruption as a significant barrier plaguing the continent (5 out of 6 interviewees). The reason why corruption is difficult to eradicate is due to it being a combination of administrative, human, and institutional weaknesses. This opinion was based on the belief that anti-corruption initiatives could pay more attention to all the angles of a complicated and multiplicity-ridden reality (1 interviewee) where these angles express themselves in leadership weaknesses, management apathy, lack of knowledge and incompetence, as well as poorly controlled and administered management systems (4 out of 6 interviewees).

One of the key ingredients missing at the existing university efforts is that fighting corruption at all levels should begin with the students who ought to be key constituents in the anti-corruption effort. Most participants believed that university curricula in economics, public administration, sociology, law and psychology must include content related to issues of corruption, public participation, open government, honesty, accountability, and transparency. Such initiatives can only become a reality when universities unite to support national and international networks of research and learning across the African continent, in conjunction with governments,



civil society and international anti-corruption organisations (4 out of 6 interviewees). These relationships will ensure relevant lessons become the basis for shared knowledge, planning and implementation of anti-corruption initiatives leading to success. For such initiatives to be realised, universities ought to ensure that their institutional rules, policies systems, plans and processes are ethical, honest, fair, transparent, and accountable (3 out of 6 interviewees).

Two interviewees highlighted that although the African continent's universities should be instrumental in the fight against corruption at all levels, their key priority should be a victory against corruption in the tertiary education sector itself as a major step forward towards a developmental and sustainable journey to Africa's social and economic transformation.

An interviewee who has a long relationship with African universities and understands the effect of corruption, held this view regarding the role of the university:

*“The university can be a major ally of the state against corruption in Africa and internationally. The anti-corruption journey starts with the students from the first day they walk to their university. It is their belief the university is the first step towards a better life for them, their families and their country. Knowing the destructive repercussions of corruption, they expect their future knowledge to make them honest and ethical citizens of the country determined to transmit anti-corruption values. They feel that their education teaches them not only to be honest, but also to lead their communities in the honest path forward.”*

This viewpoint was shared by interviewees who believe that it is common knowledge that ‘most honest students and graduates are expecting their universities to be roots of expanding knowledge governed by honesty, transparency, truth, and the commitment to be accountable and ensure clean governance at all levels’ (2 out of 6 interviewees). This means that ‘honest university students throughout Africa expect all universities’ leaderships, managements, academics, and administrators not only to be strict with dishonest and corrupt staff but to research, study and implement anti-corruption policies, rules, and regulations’ (2 out of 6 interviewees). Another interviewee raised the significance of the expected sanctions, punishment, and protection for whistle-blowers.

Research participants agreed that South African universities should collaborate with other universities on the continent and be part of the institutional fraternity sharing best anti-corruption practices. The situation at the universities in Nigeria was used as illustration where despite commitment to eradicate corruption, very few successes have been reported among their 165 universities (2 out of 6 interviewees).

### ***Emerging topics, themes, realities and challenges***

The prevailing opinion among the participants were that the priority amongst the universities in Africa should be the understanding, absorption and distribution of the African traditional knowledge as the foundation of teaching and training. These principles, based on morality, honesty, accountability and respect will lead to humanistic behaviour and unity (4 out of 6 interviewees).

Participants felt that most African universities and their relevant departments are well qualified to develop and implement anti-corruption courses and training initiatives for their contexts. Some warned though that the most important challenge facing the universities and their participating departments was a clear understanding of the multiplicity of corrupt actions, and the surreptitious methods used to perpetrate those (4 out of 6 interviewees).

The role of the law schools at universities was highlighted as key role players in anti-corruption efforts given their mandate to train and teach students in the law (4 out of 6 interviewees). The focus of anti-corruption training should be examining the mechanisms underlying it and the relations that enable it (1 out of 6 interviewees). Some participants held sceptical views regarding the commitment of universities to stamp out corruption and believe they have found excuses for neglecting their educational and social responsibility to participate in the anti-corruption efforts of the state and its people (2 out of 6 interviewees).

Furthermore, superficial knowledge of corruption realities can only lead to a narrow understanding of them, which in turn will lead to serious weaknesses in the anti-corruption interventions in the workplace (1 out of 6 interviewees). This places the onus on universities to embark on research initiatives to uncover the dynamics behind the scourge of corruption. There was consensus among the participants that it is the responsibility of universities to initiate the teaching and training of ethical leadership for present and future leaders, and it should target civil society and community-based organisations as well (6 out of 6 interviewees).

Interviewees expressed the need to inculcate the fundamentals of ethical behaviour and its core values during training with university students. Students need to understand that to put those values into effect they need to be resolute. In addition, overseeing compliance and acting against wrongdoing requires vigilance and

commitment to the cause of clean governance (4 out of 6 interviewees). It was highlighted that in the public service domain the lack of ethical conduct is especially present in supply chain and procurement, which goes unreported unless diligent financial management and auditing processes are in place (4 out of 6 interviewees). Interestingly, no participants pinpointed whistleblowing as an important element of ethical behaviour.

Expressing the shift from ethics as a vague philosophical concept in the minds of employees to enacted praxis in daily workplace reality, one participant said:

*“Most employees see ethics as a principle instead of what it really is, namely a planned and implemented reality. However, they are aware that ethics is the outcome of the development of the value statement of the organisation. They understand these relations were debated and agreed upon during the strategic planning debates and the acceptance of ethical values by all.”*

Participants added that ethical realities, honesty, and collegiality are the foundations of the development of anti-corruption human resources policies and strategies in the workplace. This puts the onus on the leadership to nurture an environment that results in employees experiencing a sense of participation and ownership in the program, and embracing the anti-corruption aims and objectives of the organisation (1 out of 6 interviewees).

### ***Feasibility of a generic anti-corruption training initiative throughout the continent***

Seen that participants were supportive of and committed to anti-corruption training at African universities it was rather surprising that their unambiguous response to the notion of a generic initiative throughout the continent was negative: ‘A generic anti-corruption training initiative throughout the African continent would be never successful’ (6 out of 6 interviewees).

The reason provided was that the political, social, economic and financial realities, as well as the costs and consequences, would be very different for each country. This implies that anti-corruption strategies can only be created according to, and appropriate for local realities (5 out of 6 interviewees). The participants expressed similar reservations regarding university-based training as recipient of such initiatives. They suggested though that the generic element in all initiatives should be the key role of ethical leadership and senior management, and that proven expertise should be the solid foundation of accountability and the application of the best practices to fight corruption (4 out of 6 interviewees).

## **Conclusion**

The study sought to explore the central role of anti-corruption training courses at universities in South Africa and its findings affirm the potential significant impact it may have on the battle against corruption.

The rationale behind this notion is that university students eventually find themselves in either the private or public sector where malfeasance is rampant, hence being equipped to be proactive and identify corruption could play a significant role in the exposure and eradication of malfeasance in society. Moreover, students arrive at university aware of corruption and its effects from their own realities and hence receptive to engage with it. This awareness, unless being nurtured and empowered by institutions of higher learning, will either dissipate or give rise to an indifferent or fatalistic attitude towards corruption.

Universities on the other hand, with their training and teaching expertise and complemented by their research resources, are ideally positioned to infuse students with the necessary knowledge and skill sets. Embedding anti-corruption training in all courses, rather than offering it as standalone electives, will best achieve this.

The potential domino effect on corruption by sufficiently empowered students, seen the wide societal network that universities are integral part of, cannot be overstated. It is hence imperative for universities to desist from viewing students as mere consumers of curricula but to rather see and embrace them as active agents of societal reform.

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### **APPENDIX: Research Participants**

Interviewee 1: Senior University Researcher in Economics, Trainer  
 Interviewee 2: Board Member, Non-Governmental Organisation  
 Interviewee 3: Professor in Law  
 Interviewee 4: Retired Professor, Public Administration, Law, Economics  
 Interviewee 5: Researcher, Non-Governmental Organisation  
 Interviewee 6: Researcher, Non-Governmental Organisation