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## INSTITUTIONALIZING THE MORAL GRADE POINT AVERAGE [MGPA] IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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### **Abstract :**

*Nigerian universities profess to develop students in learning and character. The Cumulative Grade Point Average [CGPA] only actually captures the learning prowess of the students but completely neglects the "character" aspect. This is considered a serious oversight considering the crucial importance of moral competency in building a society built on Justice, a trait which is sorely lacking in the Nigerian society today. The concept of the Moral Grade Point Average [MGPA] is introduced and suggestions are made on how Nigerian universities can institutionalize the MGPA, alongside the well-established CGPA, to truly develop students in learning and character.*

**Key Words:** Moral Competence; Higher Education; university students; Assessment

### INTRODUCTION

For Nigerian students graduating from the university is indeed a happy moment. As the graduating students are called unto the stage to receive their scrolls, the announcer states that they have been found worthy in character and learning. The Cumulative Grade Point Average [CGPA] is tangible evidence of the quality of the students' learning, but what is the evidence of their "character"? As the popular saying goes, what gets measured gets done. This paper argues that Nigerian universities should institute a measure of students' "character" so as to verify whether or not the graduating students are truly "worthy in character".

A student's character refers to his or her moral competence. The famous moral psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg defined a morally competent person **as one who has the capacity to make decisions and judgments which are moral [i.e. based on one's internal principles] and to act in accordance with such judgments** [Chaganti 2012, p53]. Nigerian universities thus make a very bold claim when they infer that the moral competencies of students that pass through their academic programmes have actually improved morally. This is because of how critically important graduates with highly developed moral competencies are to the future development of the Nigerian society which sadly seems to be riddled with morally bankrupt "leaders" who were also found worthy in "character" when they graduated from these same universities. As the saying goes, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and observable facts point to the fact that previous graduates from Nigerian universities who are currently running the country are in fact "unworthy" in character.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: First a literature review is presented to determine whether or not there is evidence that a university education actually improves a student's character or moral competence. The concept of the Moral Grade Point Average [MGPA] is introduced and

suggestions are made on how Nigerian universities can institutionalize the MGPA alongside the well-established CGPA.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: THE IMPACT OF EDUCATION ON MORAL COMPETENCE**

Swiss psychologist and philosopher, Jean Piaget is arguably one of the most influential proponents of the importance of education in the moral development of individual, particularly those of children [Rest, 1989]. In his 1932 landmark work entitled “The Moral Judgment of the Child”, he sought to investigate the moral developmental process of children by interviewing a large number of children from various schools in the Swiss towns of Geneva and Neuchatel. The results of these interviews led to the postulation of a theory of child moral development that consisted of four developmental stages: The first stage was called sensorimotor stage; at this stage, children from birth to age two were focused only on themselves and were incapable of considering the welfare of others. At the second stage called the preoperational stage, children ages two to seven are still predominantly concerned only about themselves, but begin to develop an understanding of the welfare of others as well. The concrete operational stage follows whereby children aged seven to eleven became more logical in their thinking, and were no longer concerned only about themselves. At the fourth and final stage [formal operational stage], children from eleven and older were now able to think in abstract and holistic terms regarding issues of morality. Piaget [1932] concluded that children’s morality is shaped by what they observe, and thus educational institutions have a critical role to play in their moral development by providing an interactive learning environment.

Lawrence Kohlberg, an American psychologist, is perhaps even more famous than Piaget for his contribution to the understanding of the important role of education in the development of moral competencies. As mentioned earlier in this section, his definition of moral competence is arguably the most widely cited. In his 1958 PhD Dissertation obtained at the University of Chicago entitled, “The Development of Modes of Moral Thinking and Choice in the years 10 to 16”, Kohlberg built upon the work done by Piaget [1932]. Kohlberg [1958] argued that the main goal of education should be moral development. He sought to assess the impact of education on the moral development of children of ages 10-16 by assessing their responses to various moral dilemmas. The major fruit of his research was the postulation of the now very famous “stages of moral development”. Kohlberg’s [1958] theory of moral development identified six stages of moral development, classified under three levels, each level containing two stages. The first level is called the pre-conventional level containing stages 1 and 2; at stage 1, a child acts morally so as to avoid punishment, while at stage 2, he or she acts morally to earn a reward. The next level is the conventional level containing stages 3 and 4; at stage 3, a child acts in a way that is accepted by society, and at stage 4 a child obeys the established laws of the land. The final level is the post-conventional level containing stages 5 and 6; at stage 5, a child chooses actions that will benefit the majority [this is similar to the utilitarian rule of ethics], and at stage 6, a child acts based on universal principles.

Rest [1986], a well-known American moral psychologist, followed in the footsteps of his mentor, Kohlberg [1958] by theorizing that if educators were to effectively enhance the moral development of students, they had to understand the psychological processes that needed to take place for moral action to occur. He developed a four-component model of ethical behavior to explain these processes. The 1<sup>st</sup> component was moral sensitivity which is the recognition of the existence of an ethical problem; the 2<sup>nd</sup> component was moral judgment which is making a determination of the right course of action to take in that specific ethical context; the 3<sup>rd</sup> component, moral motivation refers to the strength of an individual’s conviction to actually follow through with the right course of action

identified through his moral judgment, and the 4<sup>th</sup> component, moral character represents the actual implementation of the chosen course of action. Rest [1986] argued that by understanding these four components, educators could develop ethics curricula that would enhance each of these components, and thus improve the moral competencies of students.

More recently, Lind [2012] posited that educational institutions have a pivotal role in the development and sustainment of what he terms a “thriving democracy” [Lind, 2012, p62]. These institutions are charged with producing citizens who are able to judge and act in accordance with their individual moral principles. In addition, they should be taught how to resolve conflicts through sincere discussions rather than through violence. Unfortunately the two critical roles Lind [2012] has outlined for educational institutions are contradictory. If all individuals are encouraged to act in accordance to their moral principles, then conflict is bound to occur as people would have contradicting moral principles which cannot coexist. As these people would have completely different frames of reference, it would be impossible for them to resolve these conflicts through sincere discussions as Lind [2012] has suggested. The only way Lind’s [2012] suggestions can work is if the students’ moral principles are from the same source.

Doyle and O’Flaherty [2013] as well as Myyry *et al.* [2013] investigated the impact of higher education on moral competency in Ireland and Finland respectively. With a sample of 311 Irish participants, Doyle and O’Flaherty [2013] utilized Rest’s [1979] Defining Issues Test [DIT] to compare the moral reasoning of those participants who had at least an undergraduate degree with those that did not. They found that those with a higher education degree displayed a higher level of moral reasoning than those without a degree. Similarly, Myyry *et al.* [2013] found that education had a positive impact on moral reasoning when they compared the pre-test and post-test DIT-obtained moral reasoning scores of 132 university students in their first year and in their final year of study.

The impact of field of study on moral competence was the focus of Lofstrom [2012], Buzgova and Sikirova [2013] and Lajciakova [2013]. Lofstrom [2012] developed an instrument containing a combination of discipline-specific and general ethical scenarios in order to determine if there was a significant difference in the moral awareness of psychology majors, psychology minors, and students outside the discipline at a regional US university; her study was based on a sample size of 269 undergraduate and graduate students. She found that psychology majors had a higher level of moral awareness than non-psychology majors. Buzgova and Sikirova [2013] focused on 662 nursing and midwifery students in the Czech Republic. Utilizing Lind’s [1978] MJT, they found that midwifery students had a higher level of moral competence than their nursing counterparts. Lajciakova [2013] also utilized the MJT to assess the moral reasoning of 180 students in Slovakia, 90 in the humane discipline and 90 in the technical discipline. Her findings revealed that students in the humane disciplines displayed a significantly higher level of moral reasoning than their technical colleagues. These findings mirror those of Lofstrom [2012] in that psychology is an example of a humane discipline which non-psychology disciplines include technical disciplines.

Clipa and Iorga [2013] argued that for education to truly enhance the moral competence of children there had to be an active collaboration between schools and parents. In order to test this argument, they adopted a pretest/posttest research design in order to assess the effectiveness of an educational intervention in Romanian schools that heavily emphasized school-parent collaboration. The level of negative conduct [dishonesty, selfishness and laziness] exhibited by 28 third grade students was measured via a questionnaire. Students were assessed before the institution of the educational intervention, and at the end of the school year, 8 months after. Results revealed a significant decrease in the negative conduct exhibited by the students which provides credence to Clipa and Iorga’s [2013]

assertion that school-parent collaboration is an integral part of the power of education to develop children's moral competence.

The studies reviewed provide evidence to support the assertion that education, regardless of the level, has a positive impact in developing people's moral competencies [Doyle and O'Flaherty, 2013; Clipa and Iorga, 2013]. This development is more pronounced in students of the humanities than those involved in technical disciplines [Lofstrom, 2012; Lajciakova, 2013 ;].

## **INSTITUTIONALIZING THE MORAL GRADE POINT AVERAGE IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES**

As shown in the previous section, there is empirical support for the assertion that a university education has a positive impact on the moral competencies of students. So the claim made by Nigerian universities regarding the moral development of their students is not so far-fetched after all. However, the reality is that only the learning aspect is focused upon through a student's CGPA. The very important moral competence part of the equation is completely neglected and this thus creates an unfortunate imbalance. What we suggest is that moral competence of students in Nigerian universities be actually measured and scored as a key requirement for graduation. Every student thus has a CGPA for learning and a MGPA as a measure of his or her moral competence. We opine that each student's MGPA be assessed at the beginning of every academic session as this enables the university to determine the moral progress of each student. Just like the CGPA which eventually separates the students into excellent, average and poor vis-à-vis their learning prowess, the MGPA would separate them vis-à-vis their moral competencies. An important question is how the MGPA should be measured, and this is addressed in the paragraphs below.

A review of the moral competence literature revealed that moral competence is measured mainly using one of two tools: 1) The Defining Issues Test [DIT] or the 2) Moral Judgment Test [MJT]. The DIT was developed by American James Rest in 1979. It is based on Kohlberg's theory of cognitive moral development and comprises of six hypothetical moral dilemmas. Every dilemma is followed by twelve statements representing different recommendations on how the dilemmas should be resolved. The participants are asked to rate each statement according to its importance in descending order. They are then required to consider all twelve items simultaneously and rank the four most important of the twelve in making their decision. Participants with the highest level of moral competence, as determined by the Principled score [P score] would be expected to display a complex ability to consider the perspectives of several individuals within a social system [Fadzly, 2010; Monzon *et al.*, 2010; Cummings *et al.*, 2010; Lan *et al.*, 2011; Yunus and Abdul Rashid, 2011].

The DIT has been used extensively over the last four decades, with over a thousand studies using it. It has also proved to be very reliable with test-retest correlations and internal reliabilities in the .80s. According to Cummings *et al.* [2012], several hundred thousand respondents in over 40 countries have completed the DIT, and over a hundred new studies utilize the DIT every year. In recent times, a shorter version of the DIT called the DIT-2 was developed by Rest and Narvaez. It contains 5 moral dilemmas as opposed to six in the original DIT [Lan *et al.*, 2011].

The MJT was developed by German researcher George Lind in 1978. Similar to the DIT, the MJT is based on Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theory. The test consists of two stories including difficult moral dilemmas and 24 items based on these stories. There are 12 arguments which give reasons for the justified or unjustified behavior of the hero in each story. The participants are

expected to rate their opinions about both dilemmas on a scale of -4 to 4 [Aridag &Yuksel, 2010; Zadanbeh and Zakerian, 2011; Chaganti, 2012].

Whilst the DIT uses the P score to determine a participant's moral competence, the MJT uses a "C-index". The C-Index is defined as "a subject's capability to estimate the moral component of a situation in a greater sense, rather than an estimation of the simple statement and his/her attitude to it" [Zadanbeh and Zakerian, 2011, p50]. The author of the MJT, George Lind, makes an interesting comment as to how the moral competence of a participant is determined using the MJT. He states that the "moral judgmental competence [of a participant] does not depend on 'right' or 'wrong' answers, or on the evaluation of the individual arguments. What counts is the overall answer pattern of the participant [Lind, 2012, p56]. We find Lind's comments strange because morality by its very nature infers that some actions are right and some are wrong. How then can the moral competence of a person be determined if there is no basis for determining whether a responses is moral or immoral? Due to what we consider a glaring weakness in the MJT, we suggest that Nigerian universities adopt the DIT-2 in order to assess the MGPA of their students.

## CONCLUSION

This paper highlighted the fact that although Nigerian universities profess to develop students in learning and character, the CGPA only actually captures the learning prowess of the students but completely neglects the important issue of their moral competencies. This was considered a serious oversight considering the crucial importance of moral competency in building a thriving society built on the fundamental principles of justice for all, which is sorely lacking in the Nigerian society today.

Although, empirical evidence supported the fact that a university education does impact positively on the moral competencies of students, the fact that these moral competencies are not actually measured inferred that little importance was given to such a crucial issue. We suggested that Nigerian universities should pay greater attention to the moral competencies of their students by developing a moral competence grape point average [MGPA] utilizing the updated version of the Defining Issues Test [DIT-2] developed by Rest and Narvaez. The MGPA would enable Nigerian universities to truly produce students worthy in character and learning who would build a Just Nigeria we can all be proud of.

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