

# The Role of Ethics in Enhancing Academic Excellence in Higher Learning Institutions: A Case Study of Selected Higher Learning Institutions in Mbeya, Tanzania

Veronica Emmanuel Rutalamulwa

Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Philosophy and Social Work, Catholic University of Mbeya (CUoM), Mbeya-Tanzania

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100700532>

Received: 24 July 2026; Accepted: 30 July 2026; Published: 06 August 2026

## ABSTRACT

This study examined how ethics enhances academic excellence in higher education institutions in Tanzania, focusing on Mbeya University of Science and Technology (MUST) and Mzumbe University Mbeya College. Values like academic integrity, honesty, accountability, transparency, professionalism, fairness, and respect are not just ideals—they shape how people teach, learn, do research, and run things day to day. Still, even with ethical codes and set rules in place, these universities face big problems: cheating on exams, plagiarism, corruption, sexual harassment, favoritism, all sorts of unethical behavior that erode quality and damage the institution's name. The research examined how ethical practices feed into academic excellence, pinpointed the major ethical issues universities struggle with, and explored ways to raise the bar on ethics. To get real insight, the study used a qualitative case study approach. The researcher gathered information through interviews, group discussions, document reviews, and just observing how things play out day to day, involving faculty, staff, and students. Thematic analysis helped make sense of what everyone said. So, what did they find? When people stick to ethical principles, academic performance gets a real bump—research quality goes up, governance improves, stakeholders trust the institution more, and the school's reputation grows stronger. The big takeaway: building a strong culture of ethics and making sure people follow the rules are vital for lasting academic success. The study urges universities, policymakers, and regulators to double down on ethics education, push for more accountability, and really put ethical policies into action to raise the standard of higher education in Tanzania.

**Keywords:** Academic ethics, academic excellence, academic integrity, higher learning institutions, ethical leadership, Tanzania.

## INTRODUCTION

Ethics sits at the heart of what quality higher education means these days. It is not enough for universities to pass on knowledge or build job skills. They are expected to turn out graduates who act with honesty, integrity, responsibility, fairness, and respect—traits that shape how they behave both at school and out in the world (Bretag, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). Real academic excellence needs more than top-notch courses, research output, or higher rankings. It rests just as much on building ethical cultures that support responsible academic work and honest leadership (Gallant & Rettinger, 2022). Academic ethics is not complicated—it is about the basic values and standards everyone in academia should live by, from students and faculty to administrators and researchers. The International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI) nails it down to six values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage (ICAI, 2021).

When these values come alive in daily campus life, they make research clearer, grading fairer, and boost public trust in both university degrees and the knowledge they produce (Gallant & Rettinger, 2022). In this sense, academic excellence is not only about grades or publications. It also means quality teaching and learning, innovative research, effective management, skilled graduates, and engagement with the wider community. UNESCO (2021) puts it simply—great universities create new knowledge, train competent people, stick to ethical standards, and help society grow.

Bretag (2020) points out that a strong ethical culture pushes institutions to be more transparent, resourceful, and fair. When ethical practices are front and center, campuses turn into more creative, supportive, and dynamic places. That all sounds great, but universities face new ethical headaches these days. With tech moving fast, more people attending college, and new ways of teaching and learning online, the opportunities to learn and grow have exploded—but so have problems like plagiarism, cheating, fake research, dodgy authorship, and even misuse of AI (Gallant & Rettinger, 2022; Susnjak, 2022). Thus, both universities and their quality watchdogs now stress academic honesty, research integrity, and responsible scholarship as non-negotiable for trustworthy higher education (Eaton, 2022).

Studies show that campuses with strong ethical cultures really do better. Their students are more engaged, their research holds up, trust runs deeper, and the education is just better overall (Gallant & Rettinger, 2022). Researchers argue that it is time to move beyond punishing cheats. Instead, schools should teach ethics embed integrity in how they lead, and make these values part of everything from assessment to advising. The ultimate goal is to make academic integrity the heart of university culture, not just a rule on paper (Bertram Gallant & Stephens, 2020; Eaton, 2022). In Africa, questions around ethics and excellence in higher education attract even more debate. Many universities are growing fast, trying to keep up with research demands and chasing global recognition, all while dealing with tight budgets. While expansion helps more people get an education, it also brings a rise in cheating, plagiarism, weak research oversight, and leadership struggles (Mugimu et al., 2021; Okebukola, 2022).

These issues eat away at the value of degrees and hold back how much universities can actually contribute to society and the economy. In Tanzania, universities have changed a lot—more students, new programs, and more focus on research and innovation. Quality oversight bodies set new standards and encourage accountability. Still, big worries remain over ethics. Plagiarism, exam fraud, sketchy research, shady publishing, and just not sticking to professional standards continue to get in the way of lasting academic quality (Tanzania Commission for Universities [TCU], 2022). This shows that building up infrastructure or better curricula will not cut it on their own—you have got to build a strong ethical foundation within university life too. Ethical leadership and transparent governance stand out as the real game changers. When leaders act with integrity and set the bar for fairness, openness, and responsibility, they shape how everyone else behaves. This kind of environment makes it easier to stick to high academic standards and better research, sparking more trust all around. On the other hand, if ethical standards slide, rule-breaking becomes normal and the quality of education takes a hit (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Although plenty of research covers academic honesty, quality assurance, and management challenges, there is less focus on the unique ways ethical practices drive academic excellence in Tanzania's universities. Most studies just list problems or causes of misconduct but do not dig into how ethics actually boosts teaching quality, research, a university's reputation, or its impact on the community. There is even less data about how people in the Mbeya region's universities really understand and practice ethical values. This study therefore examines ethics and academic excellence in selected Mbeya higher learning institutions. It shows how solid ethical principles shape academic success and institutional performance. The findings will offer guidance not just to university leaders, but also to policymakers, quality watchdogs, and academic communities seeking lasting excellence.

## Theoretical Framework

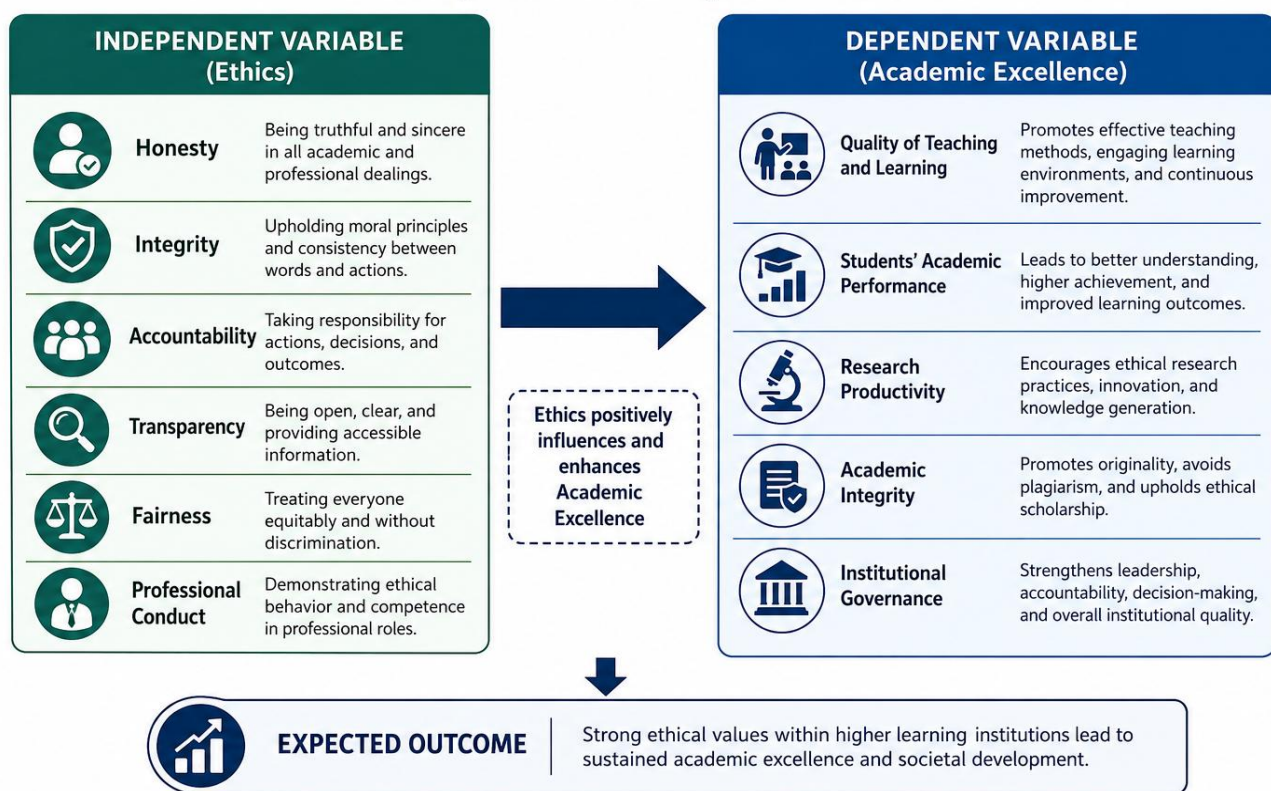
Ethical Climate Theory, originally pioneered by Victor and Cullen back in 1988. The whole idea is attractively simple—people in an organization do not act alone. Their sense of right and wrong is shaped by the atmosphere around them. If you work somewhere with a strong ethical climate, where everyone cares about doing the right thing, it is easier to make good decisions. However, if the culture feels shady—if nobody really cares about honesty or fairness—then it is way more tempting to cut corners, hide mistakes, or play favorites. Victor and Cullen identified different types of ethical climates, including caring, law and code, rules, independence, and instrumental (which are all about self-interest).

In colleges and universities, you can spot these in how well people follow school rules, whether academic honesty matters, how transparent leaders are, how fair grading seems, how researchers behave, and if the folks at the top stay accountable. When these values sink into the culture, teaching gets better, research stays solid, everything's

supervised responsibly, and collaboration comes naturally for students, professors, and administrators. Ethical Climate Theory does not just describe how people act—it shows that a healthy ethical climate actually shapes university results. Studies have found that organizations with positive climates get more committed employees, better job satisfaction, stronger trust, and improved performance. On the flip side, a weak climate brings on problems like plagiarism, cheating, research fraud, and even abuse of power. In higher education, a good climate lifts academic integrity, boosts governance, improves research credibility, and generally helps everyone do their best work. This theory really matters for exploring ethics and academic excellence in universities. It connects values like honesty, accountability, transparency, and respect straight to how students, professors, researchers, and leaders behave. Those behaviors drive all the big markers of academic success—quality teaching, strong student grades, productive research, good institutional management, competent graduates, and positive community involvement. That is why it is a useful lens for looking at how ethics help universities in Mbeya, Tanzania, thrive. Still, Ethical Climate Theory is not perfect. It mainly focuses on the institution itself and sometimes forgets about personal values, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds that also steer ethical choices. Plus, ethical climates can differ wildly across different departments or faculties in one university, so it's tough to generalize. Despite those gaps, though, the theory remains one of the go-to frameworks for understanding ethics in organizations—and it is a solid foundation for examining how ethical practices boost academic excellence in higher learning institutions.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

*The Role of Ethics in Enhancing Academic Excellence*



**Figure 1 Conceptual Framework: relationship between ethics and academic excellence in higher learning institutions.**

**Source: Researcher Construct, 2026**

The conceptual framework shows how ethics connects with academic excellence in higher education. It looks at ethics through honesty, integrity, accountability, transparency, fairness, and professional conduct—all acting as the starting point. These qualities shape academic excellence—think better teaching, higher student performance, more research, stronger academic integrity, good governance, and real community engagement. This whole idea is grounded in Ethical Climate Theory by Victor and Cullen (1988). They argue that when an institution builds a positive ethical climate, it boosts both individual behavior and the organization's overall performance.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Approach

This study applied a qualitative approach to really dig into how ethics shapes academic excellence in higher learning institutions. Qualitative research was useful as it is great for getting up close to people's real experiences, listening to how they see things, and understanding their day-to-day world (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethics is not simple, and it changes based on context, so this method let us see how ethical ideas and practices touch different parts of university life—like teaching, research, leadership, and governance.

### Research Design

The researcher used a multiple-case study design, focusing on two higher learning institutions in the Mbeya Region of Tanzania. Case studies let you see things as they actually are, especially when the relationship between what you're studying and the real-world setting is complicated (Yin, 2018). This approach helped us look closely at how ethics plays out in each institution and compare how each handles things.

### Study Area

The study was carried out at Mbeya University of Science and Technology (MUST) and Mzumbe University Mbeya Campus College (MUMCC). The researcher selected these two because they have different academic strengths and cover the main roles of higher education: teaching, research, consulting, innovation, and serving the community. MUST is mostly about science and technology, while MUMCC leans toward administration, business, law, and education. Both have clear structures for governance, quality assurance, research ethics, and codes of conduct, making them ideal for looking at how ethics feeds into academic excellence.

### Study Population

The respondents included university administrators, deans, and heads of departments, quality assurance officers, lecturers, student leaders, and students from these institutions. These folks were chosen because they're in the thick of academic leadership, teaching, research, and student affairs, as well as making sure the institution's ethical policies are followed.

### Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

The study used purposive sampling to choose respondents who really know about ethics and academic excellence. In qualitative research, this makes sense—you want to hear from people who understand what is going on (Patton, 2015). The researcher decided on the sample size by going for data saturation—basically, she kept interviewing until nothing new was coming up (Guest et al., 2020).

### Data Collection Methods

The study applied semi-structured interviews and documentary reviews. Interviews gave it a window into respondents' experiences and what they think about ethical practices and their impact on academic excellence. Reviewing documents—like strategic plans, policies, ethics guidelines, codes of conduct, and regulations—helped back up what we learned in the interviews and gave insight into how ethics is formally handled within the institutions.

### Data Collection Instruments

The study combined a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions so respondents could really share their thoughts, and we could dig deeper when needed. Alongside this, the researcher had a checklist for reviewing institutional documents related to ethics and academic excellence.

### Trustworthiness of the Study

The researcher worked to make the study reliable by focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, following Lincoln and Guba (1985). She then improved credibility by using interviews and

document reviews, plus checking back with respondents to confirm what they said. Detailed descriptions made the study transferable to other settings. She kept a close record of everything we did, from sampling to analysis, to ensure dependability. For conformability, she kept research notes, wrote down our analytical decisions, and included participants' direct quotes to back up our findings.

### **Data Analysis**

The study analyzed data using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006). We started by transcribing and reviewing interviews to get a solid grasp of the material, then coded what came up and grouped it into themes that matched our research goals. Then analyzed documents alongside interviews to round out and confirm the themes. In interpreting the results, the researcher leaned on Ethical Climate Theory.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Before starting, the researcher got ethical clearance from the appropriate committees and permission from both MUST and MUMCC. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent from everyone involved. She made sure to protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity and respected their right to withdraw at any time. All data collected were only used for academic purposes.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Participants' Understanding of Ethics in Higher Learning Institutions**

This study examines how people at higher learning institutions think about ethics. Students and staff from Mbeya University of Science and Technology (MUST) and Mzumbe University Mbeya Campus College (MUMCC) kept coming back to one point: ethics sits at the heart of university life. It is not just about following rules — it is about living up to values like honesty, integrity, accountability, fairness, transparency, respect, and professionalism, whether you're teaching, studying, doing research, leading, or working with the community. One Head of Department at MUST put it simply:

"Ethics means doing what's right even when no one is watching. At university, every lecturer, student, and administrator should do their job honestly, fairly, and professionally. Without ethics, you can not achieve real academic excellence because people stop trusting the institution." (Field work, January, 2026). A Quality Assurance Officer at MUMCC had a similar take:

"Academic excellence is built on ethical behaviour. When students do their assignments honestly, lecturers mark fairly, researchers follow research ethics, and administrators make decisions transparently, the university achieves its goal — producing capable and responsible graduates (Field work, January, 2026)."

People in the study did not just see ethics as individual behaviour — they saw it as something woven into the fabric of how the university runs. Ethics should shape everything: classes, grading, research, managing finances, hiring and promoting staff, supervising postgraduates, and delivering services. They argued that sticking to ethical principles boosts the university's credibility and creates space for learning, innovation, and scholarship. Students also showed they understood what ethics means. One student leader said:

"For us, ethics means not plagiarizing, not cheating in exams, and respecting university rules. If students act unethically, our degrees lose value — employers won't trust us." (Field work, January, 2026).

Another student put it like this: "Ethics is not just about avoiding punishment. It is about building personal integrity that will guide us after we graduate." So, students link ethics to academic integrity and personal growth. They get that what they learn about ethics at university shapes how they will have behave as professionals, and even as citizens, later in life. The university's own documents back this up. Codes of conduct, student rules, research ethics policies, and quality assurance guidelines all stress key values like integrity, fairness, transparency, professionalism, and respect. These documents lay out how to handle things like plagiarism, exam

cheating, research misconduct, sexual harassment, and abuse of power. It's clear these universities have concrete systems in place to encourage ethical behaviour. All in all, people in this study see ethics as a big-picture concept. It covers personal morality, professional responsibility, university culture, and academic honesty. They do not just see ethics as a list of rules — it's more like a philosophy that shapes everything about university life and opens the door to real academic achievement. This fits with Ethical Climate Theory by Victor and Cullen (1988), which says an institution's overall ethical climate steers how people behave. The emphasis here on honesty, fairness, accountability, and transparency shows these values get built into the way universities run — and when that happens, universities work better. The findings also line up with earlier work. Brettag (2020) says academic integrity is the basis for quality higher education because it builds trust and credibility.

Gallant and Rettinger (2022) point out that universities with strong ethical cultures have more engaged students, better research, and stronger reputations. And the focus on both institutional responsibility and personal character fits perfectly with the six core values of academic integrity listed by the International Center for Academic Integrity (2021): honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. In short, people at both MUST and MUMCC understand ethics in depth and see it as essential for excellence. Their views suggest ethics is what makes quality teaching, trustworthy research, good leadership, and accountability possible. These findings set the stage for looking deeper into how ethical practices actually play out in universities — and how they help raise academic standards.

### **Ethical Practices that Promote Academic Excellence**

Another theme that came up in the study was how much ethical practices matter when it comes to raising academic standards in universities. People from Mbeya University of Science and Technology (MUST) and Mzumbe University Mbeya Campus College (MUMCC) talked about a few core values they think are absolutely key to keeping academic quality high and helping their institutions perform better overall. They pointed to things like ethical leadership, teaching responsibly, fair assessments, research integrity, professionalism, and sticking to the rules.

#### **Ethical Leadership and Institutional Governance:**

Respondents kept coming back to the importance of ethical leadership. In their view, university leaders set the tone for everything—their choices and attitudes shape the entire environment and really drive academic excellence. Leaders are not just figureheads; they're the ones who set the ethical bar, make sure rules matter, hold people accountable, and build trust among both staff and students. A senior administrator at MUST put it this way:

“Leadership shapes how people act ethically at a university. When leaders are open, fair, and take responsibility for their actions, others tend to follow suit”.

One lecturer at MUMCC put it simply:

“Academic excellence starts with leaders who act responsibly. If they make fair decisions and stick to institutional values, staff and students trust them more, and everyone becomes more committed to their work (January, 2026)”.

So, leadership seems to set the tone for ethics across the whole institution. When leaders are ethical, decision-making is transparent, responsibilities are distributed fairly, promotions are handled objectively, and they hold themselves accountable when managing academic matters. This aligns with Ethical Climate Theory (Victor & Cullen, 1988), which posits that leaders shape the ethical climate by setting norms, expectations, and standards of behavior. When leaders act ethically, they show everyone what's acceptable and encourage people in the organization to do the right thing. Newman and colleagues (2017) also support this—they found that ethical leadership builds trust within organizations, reduces misconduct, and leads to better workplace behavior. Ethical Teaching and Professional Responsibility: Besides leadership, ethical teaching stood out as key to academic excellence. Participants said lecturers have a duty to teach well, show up prepared, treat students fairly, give honest feedback, and act as good role models. A lecturer from MUST captured it well: being a lecturer isn't just about delivering information—it's about guiding students academically and professionally. Students pay

attention to what's taught and how their teachers behave. Students agreed. One pointed out that when lecturers come to class on time, grade fairly, and treat students with respect, it pushes them to work harder and appreciate their education even more. It's clear that ethical teaching shapes how students learn, stay motivated, and engage with their studies. Professionalism among lecturers creates an environment where students feel supported and can thrive (Field work, January, 2026).

All this lines up with Bretag (2020), who says academic integrity relies on both students and staff acting ethically. UNESCO (2021) makes a similar argument: high-quality higher education comes from professional dedication, responsible teaching, and a culture of integrity and accountability across the institution.

### **Fair Assessment and Academic Integrity**

People in the study said fairness and honesty in assessments are absolutely essential for real academic excellence. They stressed that exams, assignments, grading—everything—should be done openly and without bias. That is the only way students' results can truly show what they are capable of. A quality assurance officer at MUMCC put it like this:

“Assessment is where ethics really gets put to the test. When marking is not fair, students lose faith. Then, nobody trusts the degrees anymore (Field work January, 2026).”

When assessment is fair, they feel more motivated and actually trust the system. But when they see cheating, plagiarism, or favoritism, it undermines real achievement. In short, academic excellence is not just about getting good grades—it is about making sure the way those grades are earned is fair. That is why, as Gallant and Rettinger (2022) argue, academic integrity is at the heart of why people respect universities and their qualifications in the first place.

### **Research Integrity and Scholarly Responsibility**

Respondents also brought up research integrity as a key ethical concern. They narrated how crucial it is for academic staff to do their work honestly—give credit where it is due, stay away from tampering with data, and follow proper ethics when dealing with research subjects. One researcher at MUST put it bluntly:

“A university's reputation really hinges on the quality and honesty of its research. When someone messes with results or skips out on ethical standards, it hurts not just them, but the whole institution” (Field work, January, 2026).

For the people involved, research integrity is not just a box to check. It is what keeps academic work trustworthy and relevant. They believe that ethical research lifts the university's reputation, draws in collaborators, and helps the school play a bigger part in shaping the country's future. In a similar way, UNESCO (2021) reported that responsible research is at the heart of scientific credibility and making knowledge that lasts.

### **Professional Conduct and Respect for Institutional Values**

Respondents in the study made it clear that staff and student behavior matters greatly for academic excellence. They pointed to respect, responsibility, commitment, and following university rules as the basis for ethical behavior on campus. When everyone treats each other well and acts professionally, it supports collaboration, sparks new ideas, and gets academic work done. By contrast, harassment, discrimination, cheating, or abusing power drag everyone down and harm the university as a whole. The results show that ethics is part of the university's culture, not just a set of rules. Strong ethical leadership, responsible teaching, fair grading, honest research, and professionalism help create the conditions for everyone to excel. At both MUST and MUMCC, the data showed that ethics shapes individual behavior and broader institutional outcomes. Taken together, these findings support Ethical Climate Theory, showing that a strong ethical atmosphere encourages responsibility and improves the whole university.

### **Institutional Mechanisms for Promoting Ethics**

The third theme in the study focused on what universities actually do to encourage ethical behavior among their staff, students, and administrators. People from Mbeya University of Science and Technology (MUST) and

Mzumbe University Mbeya Campus College (MUMCC) agreed: you can not just rely on individuals to act ethically. It takes real support from the institution—clear policies, strong leadership, and ongoing efforts to raise awareness. The study showed that both universities put a mix of tools to work, like codes of conduct, quality assurance systems, research ethics guidelines, orientation programs, disciplinary procedures, and examples set by ethical leaders. All these pieces come together to help keep ethical standards high (Field work January, 2026).

### **Institutional Policies and Codes of Conduct**

Respondents pointed to institutional policies and codes of conduct as key tools for shaping ethical behavior on campus. These documents set out clear expectations—not just for academic staff, but also for administrators and students. A university administrator at MUST put it plainly:

“The University has different regulations and guidelines that define the responsibilities of staff and students. These documents are important because they provide direction on what is expected ethically and professionally” (Field work, January, 2026).”

A lecturer at MUMCC echoed this idea, but with a twist:

Policies alone cannot change behaviour, but they provide a foundation. They help members of the university understand their responsibilities and the consequences of violating ethical standards (Field work, January, 2026).

Therefore, what is the takeaway here? Institutional policies take broad ethical ideas and turn them into specific, workable rules. They cut down on confusion, help keep things consistent, and set up clear steps for dealing with misconduct. All of this line up with Ethical Climate Theory (Victor & Cullen, 1988), which says people’s behavior, is shaped by the shared rules, norms, and expectations in their organization. Still, people stressed that these policies only work if everyone actually knows them, if they are enforced fairly, and if leaders take them seriously.

Then there is quality assurance systems—another big piece of the puzzle. Respondents saw these systems as central to keeping academic standards high and making sure ethical conduct has a place in everyday university life. Quality assurance covers everything: teaching, assessment, research, curriculum, and sticking to regulations. A quality assurance officer at MUMCC summed it up nicely: “Quality assurance is not only about improving academic programmes; it also ensures that academic processes are conducted ethically. It helps identify weaknesses and promotes accountability.” In short, quality assurance acts as an ethical checkpoint. By putting evaluation, feedback, and monitoring front and center, universities can spot areas that may threaten academic quality and integrity. This matches up with UNESCO’s (2021) view that quality assurance systems should always include ethical principles to make sure higher education stays credible and responsible.

### **Research Ethics Structures**

People kept coming back to research ethics committees and guidelines as key ways to encourage responsible scholarship. They said the ethical review process is not just paperwork — it protects people who take part in studies, keeps things confidential, and makes sure everyone gives informed consent. It also sets a clear standard for how to actually do the research in a responsible way. One researcher at MUST put it pretty simply: “Research ethics approval is important because it protects participants and ensures that research conducted by the university meets professional standards (Field work January, 2026).” Many respondents said that having clear ethics structures in place has raised everyone’s awareness about things like data management, academic honesty, and the basic expectations for how research should be done. In the end, these systems do not just check boxes — they actually boost the institution’s credibility, making sure the research really stands for accountability and integrity (Field work January, 2026).

### **The Ethics Orientation and Awareness Programmes are important.**

The study examined how doing the right thing helps colleges and universities fulfill their mission. Respondents from Mbeya University of Science and Technology and Mzumbe University Mbeya Campus College said that

doing the right thing is very important for good teaching and learning, for doing research that people can trust, for managing things well, for having a good reputation, and for working with the community. They thought that doing a job in school is not just about getting good grades or publishing papers; it is also about schools being honest, taking responsibility, and being fair.

### **Good Teaching and Learning**

The respondents in the study thought that teachers who do things help students do better in school. They said that teachers, who are professional, care about their students, are fair, take responsibility, and make classrooms where students feel happy and want to learn, which helps them get grades. A teacher from Mbeya University of Science and Technology said that students do better when they feel like their teachers respect them and care about them, and that teachers who do things help students trust them so students participate more in class (Field work January, 2026).

A student from Mzumbe University Mbeya Campus College said that when teachers are well-prepared and come to class, help students, and grade them fairly, students work harder because they think the system is fair (Field work January, 2026). The study showed that when teachers do things, it helps them get along better with students by being fair, being easy to talk to, being well-prepared, giving helpful feedback, and caring about what students need to learn.

This is like what Bretag (2020) pointed out: schools need to be honest and responsible, and teachers need to do things for students to get a good education. The Ethics Orientation and Awareness Programmes are very important for schools, like Mbeya University of Science and Technology and Mzumbe University Mbeya Campus College.

### **Ethics and Student Achievement**

The study also found that ethics helps students achieve academically by promoting honesty, discipline, and commitment to learning. When students do their own work and avoid cheating, their academic performance truly reflects their knowledge and skills. A student leader at MUST stated that cheating does not lead to true academic excellence and that honest work builds real skills for the future. Respondents noted that ethical students tend to develop better study habits, including independent learning and critical thinking. They also pointed out that fair grading systems encourage competition based on ability, not dishonest practices. This supports the idea that academic integrity leads to learning that reflects genuine effort and knowledge (Fieldwork, January, 2026).

### **Ethics and Research Quality**

Respondents strongly linked ethical research practices to academic excellence. They explained that universities earn credibility when researchers produce trustworthy, original, and relevant knowledge. A senior researcher at MUST noted that the quality and integrity of research reflect a university's strength, and that ethical research can solve societal problems and improve the institution's reputation. Important aspects of research integrity included proper citation, avoiding plagiarism, accurate reporting, protecting participants, and following ethical approval processes (Fieldwork, January, 2026). The findings suggest that academic excellence is not just about the amount of research, but also the ethical standards behind it.

### **Ethics and Institutional Governance**

Respondents also highlighted how ethics contributes to effective institutional governance. They explained that transparency, accountability, and fairness in decision-making build trust among staff and students and promote stability. A university administrator mentioned that good governance needs ethical leadership, and that transparent and fair decisions make people feel valued and more likely to support the institution's goals (Fieldwork, January, 2026). Rettinger (2022) had the same view when he posited that ethical governance was linked to fair hiring and promotion, responsible resource management, accountability, and effective policy implementation. This supports the idea that organizational outcomes are influenced by ethical environments created through leadership, norms, and decision-making.

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## Ethics, Institutional Reputation, and Community

Respondents stressed that ethical practices boost an institution's reputation and public trust. They argued that universities with strong ethical standards produce graduates and research that employers and society can rely on. One respondent said that a university's reputation depends on its members' behavior, and that competent and honest graduates earn the institution respect. The findings indicate that ethical conduct strengthens stakeholder confidence in qualifications, research, and services. Participants also saw community engagement as a sign of institutional responsibility, noting that ethical universities are more dedicated to relevant research, providing professional services, and addressing societal issues responsibly (Field work, January, 2026).

Overall, the findings show that ethics is a core factor in academic excellence at higher learning institutions. Ethical practices affect teaching quality, student achievement, research integrity, governance, reputation, and community engagement. The study suggests that academic excellence is shaped by the ethical values and behaviors within an institution's culture, not just its resources. Therefore, building stronger ethical cultures should be a top priority for institutions aiming for lasting academic improvement.

### Contribution of Ethics to Academic Excellence

The fourth theme addressed how ethical practices promote academic excellence. MUST respondents as well as MUMCC respondents revealed that ethics promotes quality teaching and learning, quality research, efficient governance, a good institutional reputation, and community engagement. The respondents noted that academic excellence in higher education goes beyond the attainment of quality results, increased number of publications, and enhanced performance. Instead, it is manifested in the extent to which institutions uphold integrity in all facets of their activities (Field work, January, 2026).

### Ethics and Quality Teaching and Learning

The respondents associated ethical practices of lecturers with quality teaching and learning in higher education institutions. They asserted that lecturers who demonstrate professional and responsible behaviors foster quality learning among students. For instance, a lecturer at MUST responded that:

“Students achieve good results due to the support they get from responsible teachers. In addition, lecturers who adhere to professional conduct motivate learners to become active respondents in the study process (Field work, January, 2026).”

In addition, a student respondent at MUMCC shared the following view:

“We feel motivated to learn when instructors come to class well prepared, offer guidance, and mark our assignments honestly. Their ethical conduct influences our behavior in terms of participation and level of commitment (Field work, January, 2026).”

Similarly, the respondents associated ethical lecturing with a good lecturer – student relationship, access to lecturers' assistance, good preparation and feedback by lecturers, and respect for students. Thus, the respondents agree with Bretag's (2020) view that academic integrity is a shared responsibility between students and teachers. Moreover, the respondents stressed the role of professional responsibility in promoting quality education as emphasized by UNESCO (2021).

### Ethics and Students' Academic Achievement

In addition, respondents revealed that ethics promotes academic excellence by enabling students to develop honest behaviors, discipline, responsibility, and commitment to learning. The students shared that ethical behaviors allow learners to achieve good grades without resorting to dishonest means. For instance, a student leader at MUST revealed that:

“Achieving academic excellence requires integrity. This is because a student who cheats may record good grades immediately after the exam. Nevertheless, such individuals fail to gain knowledge and skills useful in subsequent employment (Field work, January, 2026).”

According to the respondents, ethical behaviors such as avoiding plagiarism and examination malpractices promote students' academic performance. They also agreed that integrity fosters good study habits among students, increases responsibility, and discourages dishonest behaviors. Moreover, the respondents noted that fair assessment encourages healthy competition among students based on merit. Therefore, the respondents support Gallant and Rettinger's (2022) claim that achievement-related integrity fosters learning by enabling students to demonstrate knowledge and skills. Similarly, the views are consistent with those of the International Center for Academic Integrity (2021) on the role of honesty and responsibility in achieving academic excellence.

### **Ethics and Research Quality**

According to the respondents, institutions can achieve academic excellence by upholding ethical practices in research activities. They argued that ethical research promotes integrity in research practices, encourages publication of quality work, and enhances credibility of the institution.

A senior researcher at MUST responded that:

"The reputation of an institution depends on the standard of research. Therefore, we need to uphold integrity when conducting research to produce quality work while enhancing the credibility of the organization (Field work, January, 2026)." The respondents noted that ethical research requires correct citation of all sources of information, avoiding plagiarism and misrepresentation of results, protecting the rights and well-being of respondents, and submitting work for publication after verifying its authenticity. According to the respondents, institutions need to emphasize on ethics in publication since it enhances academic excellence while promoting the credibility of the organization. Hence, the respondents agree with UNESCO (2021) on the need to uphold responsible research practices for sustainable knowledge advancement.

### **Ethics and Institutional Governance**

The findings also revealed that institutions of higher learning can achieve academic excellence by promoting ethical practices in governance. The respondents asserted that honesty and integrity in governance promote trust among members of the university community. For instance, a respondent who was a university administrator argued that:

"Good governance depends on the ethical behavior of the leadership. When leaders make fair decisions as well as conduct themselves unethically, members of the university community trust them and are likely to obey the established rules and regulations (Field work, January, 2026)."

The respondents related ethical governance to fair recruitment and promotion practices, responsible management of finances, accountability of officials, and effective policy-making. Thus, the views of the respondents support Ethical Climate Theory's view on attainment of organizational goals. In line with the theory, the respondents argued that ethical climate is achieved when organizations apply integrity and responsible leadership to motivate members to achieve organizational goals.

### **Ethics, Institutional Reputation and Community Engagement**

According to the respondents, ethical practices enhance community engagement and institutional reputation. They argued that a good reputation enables institutions to attract potential students, facilitates partnerships with businesses, and attracts government support. For instance, a participant revealed that:

"The image of an institution is determined by the level of integrity among its members. Therefore, if graduates have good behavioral skills and integrity, the entire institution gains from the reputation (Field work, January, 2026)."

The respondents asserted that institutions can engage the community while enhancing reputation by providing quality research and professional services that meet the expectations of the target audience. In addition, they argued that institutions need to uphold social responsibility in research and service delivery to enhance

community engagement. Therefore, the respondents agree with Newman et al. (2017) that ethical climate fosters organizational reputation and commitment.

Based on the findings, the study concludes that ethics promotes academic excellence. Ethical practices play a critical role in achieving academic excellence in higher education institutions since they promote quality teaching and learning, quality research, efficient governance, and good institutional reputation. According to the study, ethics enhances academic excellence by encouraging responsible lecturing, fostering good study habits among students, and increasing academic performance. It also promotes integrity in research activities to enhance credibility of the institutions as well as foster trust among members of the university community and the general public. By emphasizing on aspects of responsible leadership and governance, ethical practices also promote academic excellence. Therefore, based on the findings, the study recommends that institutions need to invest more in developing good ethical cultures to support academic excellence.

### **Ethical Challenges Affecting Academic Excellence**

Despite the contribution of ethics to academic excellence, respondents identified various challenges hindering the universities' capability to uphold ethical cultures. MUST and MUMCC students and lecturers discussed academic dishonesty, lack of implementation of the existing ethical policies, limited awareness of ethical issues, misuse of technology, leadership-related problems, and institutional capacities as the key challenges. The respondents emphasized that besides having policies and regulations addressing the key ethical issues, it is important to ensure their effective implementation and institutional support (Fieldwork January, 2026).

### **Academic Dishonesty and Integrity Violations**

Academic dishonesty and integrity violations were among the central ethical issues affecting academic excellence. Plagiarism, examination malpractices, and inappropriate collaboration were some of the academic dishonesty cases experienced at the universities. A lecturer from MUST explained:

“Plagiarism is a bigger problem than people realize because most students tend to focus more on getting their assignments done rather than understanding new concepts; therefore, they do not see the seriousness of being involved in academic dishonesty” (Field work, January, 2026).

A student participant from MUMCC added:

“Some students resort to dishonest means in their studies because they want good grades. As a result, those who do not resort to such practices feel that they are being disadvantaged” (Field work, January, 2026).

The respondents revealed that academic dishonesty not only compromised individual learning but also the reputation of the universities because it allowed students to obtain grades without demonstrating adequate skills and knowledge. The findings resonated with Gallant and Rettinger (2022), who explicated that academic dishonesty, compromises the meaning and value of academic excellence.

### **Inadequate Enforcement of Policies**

The respondents also highlighted the role of the universities' failure to enforce the existing ethical policies and regulations. Though the institutions have well-articulated policies and regulations, some respondents argued that the implementation process was not equitable, which caused partial compliance:

“A lot of the challenges we experience with adhering to professional standards emanate from the non-implementation of the existing policies and regulations. The selective enforcement of rules discourages individuals from complying with the rules because they view them as unfair” (Quality assurance officer, Field work, January, 2026).

According to the findings, selective implementation of regulations diminished the trust of the staff and students in the system as individuals felt that they could only follow the rules that benefited them. The findings echoed

the Ethical Climate Theory's emphasis on the need for demonstrating fairness by implementing the existing policies to ensure that everyone is accountable for their actions (Victor & Cullen, 1988).

### **Limited Awareness and Inadequate Ethics Education**

One of the key challenges affecting ethical cultures in the universities was the insufficient awareness and education on ethics. Although the universities conduct training sessions on professional standards for new students and staff, respondents requested more continuous training on related issues. A university administrator observed:

“Orientation on institutional policies and regulations is important; however, ethics should be taught continuously instead of integrating it into a short program during entry” (Field work, January, 2026).

The respondents recommended continuous training sessions that can help raise awareness about research integrity, plagiarism, responsible use of technology and artificial intelligence, and research ethics. The findings showed that training should focus on providing the necessary knowledge and skills to perform duties ethically and take responsibility for one's actions. Similarly, Eaton (2022) argued that it is essential to educate students on professional standards instead of punishing them for misconduct after they enter the profession.

### **Abuse of Technology and Associated Challenges**

Misuse of new technologies and the resulting challenges were also among the issues affecting academic excellence. The respondents agreed that though new technologies have been helpful in learning and research, they were often misused, thus creating additional ethical issues. A lecturer shared their views on technology-related challenges in the universities:

“Technology is helpful in learning and research, but it has also become a great challenge because students use it to cheat and produce substandard assignments instead of enhancing their academic skills” (Lecturer, Field work, January, 2026).

According to the respondents, the universities need to develop clear guidelines regarding technology use and ensure that students use it responsibly. The recommendations resonated with the discussion by Eaton (2022) on the need for institutions to address the challenges of embracing new technologies in learning and research.

### **Leadership and Institutional Capacity Constraints**

Respondents identified various leadership-related issues that hindered the development of a positive ethical culture in the universities. They argued that apart from developing policies and regulations, institutional leaders needed to demonstrate higher accountability and transparency in their practices. An academic staff member shared their views on the role of leadership in fostering a positive ethical climate:

“The role of leadership is to demonstrate how they want us to behave as members of this institution; therefore, they need to be more accountable and transparent in their actions for us to follow them in matters related to integrity” (Academic staff, Field work, January, 2026).

The findings emphasized the importance of transformational leadership styles that can help foster integrity in institutions of higher learning. According to the respondents, leadership plays a pivotal role in influencing the ethical climate of an organization; thus, the need to adopt more ethical leadership styles to enhance academic excellence. The findings resonated with the Ethical Climate Theory's emphasis on the importance of demonstrating desirable behavior to influence the ethical perspectives of others (Victor & Cullen, 1988).

The respondents also noted the impact of limited institutional capacity on the inability of the universities to enforce policies addressing key ethical issues affecting academic excellence. A university administrator explained the effect of limited resources on handling ethical issues:

“It is challenging to implement policies addressing ethical issues in the institutions due to limited resources. For instance, it is expensive to invest in software that can prevent plagiarism, and therefore, most universities struggle to monitor integrity violations during research” (University administrator, Field work, January, 2026).

The findings illustrated how limited capacity hindered efforts aimed at enhancing institutional integrity. According to the respondents, insufficient funding and lack of skilled personnel constrained the capability of the universities to provide relevant support, such as ethics education and research audits, required to promote academic excellence. Thus, according to the findings, the universities needed to invest more in enhancing institutional capacity to support increased demand for better academic quality.

Overall, the findings demonstrated that the issue of ethics in higher learning institutions went beyond the mere implementation of policies. The respondents emphasized the need for continuous awareness and education on academic integrity, which would contribute to enhanced compliance with the guidelines and policies. According to the study, increased awareness would help eliminate many integrity violations, especially those related to examination malpractices and plagiarism. The recommendations also emphasized the importance of investing in institutional capacity to ensure that there are enough staff and resources to support higher education standards. Through the discussion leading to the report, the study demonstrated the role of Ethical Climate Theory in explaining how organizational climate influences individual behavior. Thus, the need to build a positive ethical climate in universities to enhance academic excellence.

### **Strategies for Strengthening Ethics and Academic Excellence**

The last thing that respondents talked about in the study was how to make practices better and improve academic excellence in higher learning institutions. People from Mbeya University of Science and Technology and Mzumbe University Mbeya Campus College said that to improve excellence, universities need to keep working on building ethical cultures. They said that ethics should not just be about following rules when something goes wrong. It should be a part of everything that universities do, like teaching, learning, research, leadership, and how the institution is run.

### **Strengthening Ethics Education and Awareness Programmes**

People in the study strongly suggested that universities should teach ethics to students and staff often. They said that regular training, workshops, and awareness programmes would help people understand what they should do to be ethical and how to deal with problems that come up. A student leader from Mbeya University of Science and Technology said:

"Ethics should be taught all the time, not just when students first start. A lot of problems happen because people know the rules. They do not really understand why being ethical is important (Fieldwork January, 2026)."

A lecturer from Mzumbe University Mbeya Campus College also said:

"Regular training is necessary because things are always changing. We need to keep talking about things like intelligence, research integrity, and digital learning (Fieldwork January, 2026)."

These ideas suggest that teaching ethics should not just be about introducing rules but about helping people understand why ethics is important and how to make choices. This idea is similar to what Eaton said in 2022 that academic integrity depends on creating a culture of ethics, not just punishing people who do wrong. It also agrees with what Victor and Cullen said in 1988 that when people in an organization share the values and expectations, they are more likely to behave ethically.

### **Promoting Ethical Leadership and Accountability**

People in the study said that leaders are very important for making sure that universities behave ethically. They said that leaders should be examples by being transparent, fair, and responsible. A senior academic administrator

said:

"People watch what leaders do more than what they say. If leaders are honest, it is easier to create a culture in the university (Fieldwork January, 2026)."

Respondents in the study suggested that leaders should make sure that decisions are transparent, policies are fair, resources are used well, and everyone is treated equally. The study found that leaders are crucial for making ethics a part of life in universities. This agrees with what Newman (2017) and others said: ethical leaders help create trust and make organizations work better. In the Ethical Climate Theory, leaders have a role in shaping the ethical environment by setting standards and expectations.

### **Enhancing Policy Implementation and Monitoring Mechanisms**

Re in the study said that universities should make sure that their ethics policies are actually working. They said that universities should not just create rules but make sure that everyone follows them. A quality assurance officer said:

"Rules only work if they are applied fairly and consistently. People need to see that ethics apply to everyone (Fieldwork January, 2026)."

Respondents in the study suggested that universities should improve their monitoring systems, make it easier to report problems, and ensure that disciplinary procedures are fair. They believed that if universities enforce their rules consistently, people will trust the system more and behave better (Fieldwork January, 2026). This idea agrees with what Gallant and Rettinger (2022) said: academic integrity requires universities to create systems that promote ethics and deal with problems effectively.

### **Integrating Ethics into Teaching, Learning and Research**

People in the study said that ethics should be a part of all activities, not just something separate. They suggested that universities should include ethics in curricula, research training and professional development. A researcher from Mbeya University of Science and Technology said:

"Ethics should be a part of culture. Students and researchers should see ethics as part of being a scholar, not something required by rules (Fieldwork January, 2026)."

Respondents in the study believed that if universities make ethics a part of everything they do, students and staff will understand the importance of ethics and apply it in their work. This idea agrees with what Bretag (2020) said: academic integrity works when it becomes part of the university culture and everyday practice.

### **Promoting Responsible Use of Technology**

Respondents in the study said that universities should create guidelines and training on how to use technology, especially artificial intelligence tools. They said that technology should be used to support learning and research, not replace thinking. A lecturer said:

"The solution is not to reject technology but to teach people how to use it. Students need to understand how technology can help with work without compromising integrity (Fieldwork January, 2026)."

Respondents in the study suggested that universities should create literacy programmes, update their rules, and keep talking about the challenges of new technology. This idea reflects concerns about academic integrity in the digital age, where universities need to adapt their ethics frameworks to deal with new forms of misconduct.

### **Strengthening Stakeholder Participation and Ethical Culture**

Respondents in the study said that all members of the university community should be involved in promoting ethics. They said that academic excellence cannot be achieved by creating rules but requires everyone to work

together. People in the study suggested that universities should create communication channels where people can discuss ethics and report problems without fear. They believed that if everyone is involved, trust will increase and people will feel more responsible for upholding the university values (Fieldwork January, 2026)."

Overall, the study found that strengthening ethics requires an approach that involves education, leadership, policy implementation, technology awareness, and stakeholder participation. People in the study saw ethics as a process of cultural development, not just a one-time thing. Through the perspective of Ethical Climate Theory, these strategies show that academic excellence is achieved when ethics becomes a part of the university's culture, relationships, and daily practices. A strong ethical culture encourages behaviour that increases trust and helps universities fulfill their missions of producing competent graduates, creating knowledge, and contributing to society.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusion

This study looked at how ethics can help make excellence better in some higher learning institutions in Mbeya Region, Tanzania. The study used Ethical Climate Theory by Victor and Cullen (1988) to see how ethical values and practices affect excellence. The results show that ethics is not about how individuals behave, but it is also about the culture of the institution, which affects teaching, learning, research, governance, and relationships in university communities. The study found that people from Mbeya University of Science and Technology and Mzumbe University Mbeya Campus College think that ethics is about being honest, having integrity, being accountable, being transparent, being fair, having respect, and being professional. These values are necessary for building trust, credibility, and academic quality in institutions.

The results also show that ethical practices help improve excellence by strengthening teaching and learning, making assessment fair, supporting responsible research, improving leadership, and enhancing the institution's reputation. However, challenges remain, including dishonesty, limited ethics knowledge, inconsistent implementation of ethical policies, misuse of technology, leadership problems, and limited institutional capacity. This means that policies alone are not enough; institutions need ethics education, strong leadership, and commitment to ethics. The study asserts that ethics is an important part of higher education quality and should not be seen only as a rule to follow. Institutions that promote ethical climates can strengthen academic standards, increase stakeholder trust, and develop sustainably.

### Recommendations

Based on what the study found, it recommends the following: Higher learning institutions should have programs that teach ethics to students, teachers, and administrative staff all the time. Ethics should be part of teaching, learning, professional development, and institutional activities so that people really understand values, not just follow rules. University leaders should be honest, transparent, fair, and accountable when making decisions. Good leadership is very important because it affects the development and sustainability of cultures in universities.

Institutions should make sure that ethical policies are implemented, monitored, and evaluated in a way. Codes of conduct and academic regulations should be applied consistently. Fairly so that institutions can be trusted and accountable. Universities should improve research ethics by having effective ethics committees, training researchers, preventing plagiarism, and doing research in a responsible way. They should also make guidelines. Train people to use digital technologies and artificial intelligence in a responsible way.

Universities should involve students, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders in talking about issues. Open communication and working together can make ethical institutional cultures stronger. This study adds to what we know about ethics and academic excellence in education by showing that ethical culture is a big factor that affects academic quality. Unlike studies that just look at specific types of misconduct; this study looks at ethics as a broader institutional culture that involves leadership, governance, teaching, research, and stakeholder relationships. The study also adds to theory by using Ethical Climate Theory in Tanzanian learning institutions. The results show that the ethical environment in institutions affects how individuals behave and shapes outcomes, which highlights the importance of looking at ethical climate when trying to improve quality in higher education.

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