

# Honour at Ashesi University College

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## Contents

- Introduction.....1
- Exam Code of Conduct .....2
- Implementation of the Examination Honour Code .....2
- Obstruction of the Examination Honour Code Process.....2
- General Practices and Procedures.....2
- Joining the Honour System (First year classes) .....3
- What it means to join the Honour System .....3
- What is means to decline joining the Honour System .....3
- Proceeding with care .....3
- Background information.....3
- The first precaution – getting student commitment.....4
- The second precaution – maintaining student commitment.....4
- Academic and administrative precautions .....4
- Pedagogical case for the Honour System .....5
- Results so far .....5

## Introduction

In keeping with Ashesi’s mission to educate a new generation of ethical leaders, the trustees, faculty and executives of Ashesi University approved in November 2007 a proposal to formally invite selected classes at Ashesi to adopt an Honour System for examinations at the university. The code was voted into force by students in January 2008.

The adoption of the Examination Honour Code marks a significant step in the history of Ashesi University College. The code is intended to build a high-trust community, to put students in charge of their ethical posture and the reputation of their alma mater, and by so doing, to take a significant step in Ashesi’s mission to educate a new generation of ethical leaders in Africa.

At Ashesi University College, we believe strongly in experiential learning. Students learn best when they practice and apply principles. In much the same way that Computer Science students learn through the *practice* of designing, implementing and testing software, students learn ethics by *practicing* ethical behavior. Ethics, whose root lies in the Greek word “*Ethos*” which means habit, especially requires practice. The Honour System at Ashesi provides an avenue for students to practice doing the right thing even when no one is watching. In other words, they develop a habit of honourable behaviour that is internally driven.

*Through the Honour System, Ashesi students practice resisting temptation; take ownership of Ashesi's unique mission; refuse to give their friends permission to be mediocre or unethical; and protect the value of the Ashesi education.*

## Exam Code of Conduct

The purpose of the Exam Code of Conduct is to create an ethical environment for examinations. Failure to abide by the Exam Code of Conduct results in disciplinary action. During an examination, students:

- Are not allowed to talk to each other, exchange information of any kind, or engage in any activity that could result in the unfair advantage for one or more students before, during, or after the quiz or exam, while they are in or out of the classroom;
- Must leave all books and other aids in an inaccessible place (except for open-book quizzes or exams);
- Must leave as much space as possible between students (as much as the room allows);
- Should try to ensure that their line of sight does not cause others to suspect them of cheating;
- Must leave mobile phones and other electronic communication devices switched off

## Implementation of the Examination Honour Code

Students in classes that vote to join the Honour System take tests and exams on their honour, without invigilators. At the end of each test, each student is may sign the following statement.

**I pledge on my honour that during this examination I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance, nor have I seen any violations of the Exam Code of Conduct.**

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

[ ] I have intentionally not signed the pledge (check only if appropriate)

I have personally witnessed the following Examination Honour Code violations or obstructions (optional):

## Obstruction of the Examination Honour Code Process

The university's decision to adopt an honour system for examinations is a significant one, the abuse of which will fracture the ethical framework central to our mission. The following instances constitute violations of the Examination Honour Code and can lead to serious sanctions including suspension or expulsion from the university community.

- Failure to abide by the Exam Code of Conduct.
- Attempting to prevent the discovery of prohibited conduct, or attempting to obstruct access, to alter, to destroy, or to conceal potential evidence connected with an Exam Honour Code investigation.
- Attempting to discourage, intimidate or deter complainants, witnesses, or other participants in an Exam Honour Code investigation.
- Initiating an Exam Honour Code complaint without any basis in fact and with the intent to harass another student.

## General Practices and Procedures

- Suspected violations of the Exam Honour Code may be reported by intentionally omitting to sign the pledge, or by speaking directly with the Lecturer or the Dean of Students.
- If a pledge is unsigned and unchecked, the student will be contacted in order to determine whether the student intentionally left the pledge unsigned. If the absence of signature was intentional, the lecturer or Dean of Student

Affairs will investigate the matter further. Violations of the Exam Honour Code are adjudicated by the Ashesi Judicial Committee (AJC) as described in the Student Handbook.

## Joining the Honour System (First year classes)

All new classes at Ashesi are given the opportunity to discuss the honour system during their first semester, and to make a conscious decision to ratify the honour code or to operate outside the honour system. First-year classes are required to vote after the mid-semester break of their first semester, and the result of that vote is effective for their four years of college at Ashesi. Classes that vote not to join the honour system are **not** given the opportunity to join at a later date. Similarly, classes that vote to join the honour system during their first year are not given the opportunity to vote out of the system at a later date.

*In order to ensure that there is a clear consensus among classes that join the honour system, a class must achieve a 2/3 majority vote in favor of joining the honour system.*

## What it means to join the Honour System

The honour code is intended to build a high-trust community, to put students in charge of their ethical posture and the reputation of their alma mater, and by so doing, to take a significant step in Ashesi's mission to educate a new generation of ethical leaders in Africa.

Classes that choose to join the honour system are deciding to put every member of that class in charge of enforcing a no-cheating environment. Students will be making an affirmative choice to act according to a high standard of personal ethical behavior, and to hold their peers to the same standard. Classes that take this stand with regard to exams are also implicitly committing to ethical behavior outside the classroom as well. They will be afforded a high level of trust by the faculty and administration, and as such, will fully participate in a university that is currently the only one in Ghana where students can be trusted to take un-proctored exams.

## What is means to decline joining the Honour System

Classes that choose **not** to join the honour system are simply stating that they are **not prepared**, as a class, to hold each other responsible for ethical behavior. Some students who vote against the honour system may do so because they are unwilling to personally commit to Ashesi's ethical code and are not in favor of being held accountable by their peers.

Classes that choose to operate outside the honour system will not have the same level trust with faculty and administrators. Their exams will be proctored. Please note, however, that the university remains committed to its principles and will hold all students accountable regardless of whether their class has joined the honour system or not. Not joining the honour system does not constitute a license to cheat; it only means that members of the class will be less trusted than others in this community. The university will continue to hold students individually responsible for complying with the university's code of ethics.

## Proceeding with care

In implementing an Honour System at Ashesi University College, the trustees, faculty, administrators and executives recognized the need to proceed carefully and to implement checks and balances.

## Background information

Ashesi University College is not the first university in the world to implement an Honour System. With humility, we are learning from some of the best universities in the world including Princeton University, Haverford College, Dartmouth

College, and the College of William & Mary, which implemented America's first student Honour Code in the eighteenth century. With courage, we are building a community of trust within a Ghanaian university, and are training students to hold themselves responsible for their own actions and integrity.

In 2006, with the encouragement of the President of the College, the Ashesi Community began an intense debate about how to foster a greater sense of ethics and excellence on campus. This debate evolved in 2007 into a discussion of whether the student body could take responsibility for the ethical posture of the institution, and whether an exam Honour Code would be an appropriate means to accomplish this goal. Ashesi University College began an Honour System for exams in January 2008.

### **The first precaution – getting student commitment**

In 2007, when the faculty and administration of Ashesi decided by broad consensus to implement an Honour System and to stop invigilating exams, we recognized the need for care. As such, the faculty and administration decided to adopt a system that ensured that only those classes that we deemed ready would be invited to make a decision on joining an Honour System. Classes that were already demonstrating strong ethical character as measured by low instances of plagiarism and other offences were therefore invited first. Ultimately, two classes were invited to vote on the Honour System in 2008. The other two classes that were not invited were asked to engage in a vigorous debate and to conduct themselves in a manner that would communicate a stronger ethical posture to the rest of the Ashesi community. One of those classes was eventually invited to vote and subsequently joined the honour system on the basis of a 90% majority vote.

Ashesi's approach of demanding a record of good behavior and a class vote was devised to ensure that students grappled with the question of ethics both individually and collectively; that they communicated to the rest of the Ashesi community in both word and deed that they were committed to honourable behaviour; and that they affirmatively made a choice to join the honour system. Simply stated, our approach required deep reflection and buy-in to Ashesi's mission and principles.

### **The second precaution – maintaining student commitment**

Ashesi maintains student commitment to the Honour System through a variety of activities including discussions during community town hall meetings; emphasis on ethics across the curriculum; open communications regarding judicial committee verdicts on ethics violations; and inviting guest speakers from Corporate Ghana to talk about the importance of ethics. Also significantly, asking freshman classes to engage in a serious debate and class vote before joining the Honour system ensures a very lively conversation involving first year and upper class students each year on the question on ethics and honour. It keeps the matter top-of-mind every year.

### **Academic and administrative precautions**

Ashesi faculty and administrators employ a variety of devices to safeguard the Honour System.

1. Seats are very widely spaced during final exams in order to help prevent cheating and to make it very obvious to other students when an unethical student attempts to cheat.
2. A seating chart is created for each exam room. This aids and subsequent investigations of allegations of cheating.
3. Students are not allowed to bring bags, mobile phones, or text books (except for open book exams) to the exam room
4. Faculty avoid the use of multiple choice questions. By setting exams that demand a demonstration of conceptual understanding, faculty are more easily able to identify cheating. Also answers to "essay" questions are more difficult to copy.
5. Faculty occasionally shuffles exams questions so that students sitting next to each other have differently numbered questions. This makes it very difficult for a student to copy another's work without getting caught.

## Pedagogical case for the Honour System

### A number of questions have guided our decision to implement an Honour System:

First, if a student does not cheat because there was an invigilator watching over him or her, and if that student would and did cheat at every opportunity, could that person really be considered ethical? And if a university produces graduates of this nature, then is that university actually developing the kinds of ethical leaders that our society needs?

Second, corruption is rife in Ghana, in spite of all the work that our educational institutions are doing. Why should we then continue to do the same things that other institutions have done for over fifty years and expect to achieve a different result? Maybe it is time to try a different approach.

Third, why not conduct this very important experiment –which has been successful at other institutions around the world– to see if it makes a positive difference in Ghana? Why not conduct this at Ashesi while we're still a small and more manageable institution whose student culture is still in its formative stages?

## Results so far

Today, Ashesi has a student culture that frowns on cheating. Students who cheat are looked down upon, and are reported to the Ashesi Judicial Committee (AJC). Examinations at this institution are conducted with the highest standards of integrity. In fact, students report that exams are now conducted with more discipline and integrity than they were before 2008 when the Honour System was instituted. Ashesi students are very proud of this fact.

Ashesi senior, Nana Ama Akosa, describes how her class came to the decision to sign the Honour Code, *"It took my class almost an entire semester to decide whether or not we were ready for such a responsibility- that is, not only to conduct ourselves properly during exams but also to hold our peers to the same standard. During the decision-making process, we as a class walked through the meaning of morality and ethics and the summary is this: Being ethical means doing the right thing even when no one else is watching. We feel good about the Honour Code. We stand out because of it. And we walk with our heads held high because we truly believe in it."*

The few instances of cheating that have occurred have been reported by students and been addressed by the AJC. During the August to December semester of 2009, one student who cheated on a quiz later reported himself to his lecturer, apologized for his actions, and faced the consequences. By taking responsibility for his conduct, that student took an important step towards interrupting a likely history of unethical behavior, and set himself on a path towards excellence.