

## HONORIS CAUSA

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A degree is a qualification granted by a tertiary institution mostly associated with an academic position, and awarded in recognition of the recipient having satisfactorily completed a prescribed course of study. The most common degrees awarded today are bachelor's, awarded after 3-5 years post-secondary or high school education; master's after 2-4 years post Bachelor's degree, and doctorate 3-5 years after a master's degree.

The length of time required to earn these academic qualification depends on course of study and consists of carefully crafted programs with prescribed lecturer contact hours, assignments and assessments. Within this period of time, every effort is made to ensure that there is evidence of transfer of knowledge before award of an academic degree. In order to ensure that one university's program compares favorably with those of other universities in the country, the sole regulator in the country is the Commission for University Education (CUE). The commission, which has the mandate of standardisation and quality control, ensures universities meet and maintain conditions required for being chartered and programs' approval. There are circumstances where a degree is granted from outside the country and, for instance an employer wishes to determine its validity and equivalence. On request, CUE consults with the regulator commissions of the host countries, compares the programs and advices on the credibility of the university and the program. Regional and international regulators such as Inter University Council of Eastern Africa (IUCEA) and the Association of Commonwealth Universities facilitate such consultations. This degree verification process ensures that for instance, a bachelor's degree in sociology from one university is comparable with that from any other university.

Masters and doctoral degrees, commonly called postgraduate degrees (graduate degrees in American universities) are specialist in nature and build on the foundation laid in the bachelor's or undergraduate degrees. They train one to develop an inquisitive and analytical mind that will result in contribution to new knowledge in the chosen area of specialization. To achieve this, postgraduate degrees often require course work, research and writing up a thesis or dissertation. The student then presents and defends their work before a panel of experts.

There are times however when persons are deemed worthy admission by a university to a degree without undergoing an academic course of study. These are honorary degrees '*honoris causa*' (Latin: 'for the sake of the honour') and are usually doctorate degrees. These are conferred as a way of honouring a distinguished visitor's contributions to a specific field, or to society in general, and

the university often derives benefits by association with the person in question. In this respect, Kenyatta University has awarded honorary doctorate degrees to among others entrepreneur James Mwangi; University of Nairobi to former UN Secretary General and Kenya's 2007/8 post-election conflict mediator Kofi Annan; Egerton University to former Tanzanian President and mediator Benjamin Mkapa; Masinde Muliro to athlete Tegla Lorupe; Maseno University to parliamentary Speaker Kenneth Marende and Jomo Kenyatta University to former UN Habitat Director Anna Tabajuka and distinguished Professor Calestous Juma. Former President Mwai Kibaki and Prime Minister Raila Odinga have honorary degrees from several universities. It is however important to note that, like in some of the cases above, a person with an earned degree can be granted an honorary one.

Honorary degrees are not considered to be of the same standing as substantive earned academic degrees and many universities request that an honorary graduate refrain from using the title 'Dr'. Some honorary degree recipients have been criticized for use and insisting on being called 'Doctor' as a result of their award, for this may mislead the general public about their qualifications. The recommended practice is for the recipient to use the abbreviations of the degree at the end of his name and note that it is honorary by adding the words '*honoris causa*'.

As expected, award of honorary degrees can be subject to abuse, and some universities have been accused of granting honorary degrees in exchange for large donations. Others times, such degrees have been controversial such as one given to George W. Bush in 2001 by Yale University which resulted to a students and faculty boycott of the university's graduation ceremony. Honorary degrees to Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe by University of Edinburgh and University of Massachusetts were withdrawn after these universities later decided that the recipient violated human rights abuse or practiced political corruption, acts which are not honourable after all!

It appears that there is an epidemic of degrees and Kenya is awash with Dr this one and Dr that one, and we need to interrogate this matter carefully. This matter came to the attention of Kenyans last year when the IEBC published the requirement of a university degree for certain elective positions in the general elections. This appeared vague for it apparently was not clear whether the IEBC meant all degrees, whether academic or honorary. The CUE was thus kept busy. Should the IEBC have considered honorary degrees and accept the nominations of holders thereof? The crucial question is, can an earned qualification be equated to an honorary recognition? The bottom line is whether a degree is a degree is a degree. Is Dr Earned the same as Dr Given?

My fellow academicians, the issue at hand is, can the knowledge, skills and attitude a student acquires; the sweat, tears and sleepless nights experienced in the 10

university education years required to earn a doctorate degree amount to naught? Is it possible that all the teaching lecturers undertake till voices go hoarse, marking to the wee hours of the morning are all in vain? Let us be honest to ourselves. None of us would live in a house built by an honorary architect and quantity surveyor. Would you drive a car developed by a mechanical engineer with an honorary degree on a road constructed by an honorary civil engineer? What of being represented by a lawyer with an honorary law degree or operated by a doctor with honorary medical degree? Good people, I am persuaded that this is a straight forward matter. There are degrees and there are degrees. Do we really need the Commission for University Education to tell us this? Let's leave everyone to do their work. The CUE the task of evaluating and approving universities and their programs; lecturers to infuse knowledge, skills and attitude and students to work hard and earn degrees. Regarding doctorate degrees, let us be clear it is: Dr Earned, PhD and Mr Given, Dr *honoris causa*.

