

# TOWARDS A MORE ENDURING PREVENTION OF SCHOLARLY PLAGIARISM AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NIGERIA

By

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## **Abstract**

*The rate at which university students involve in various acts of plagiarism has been a matter of central concern to academics and university management at least over the last decades. The scholarly contributions that the issue has generated are becoming interminable. It is beyond the intention of this paper however to conclude this vast discussion but rather suggest that effective solution to plagiarism among students in the university should not only be hinged on detection-cum-punitive measure alone at the expense of university based prevention programme that helps students develop strong writing skills. This review identified a range of scholarly works that presented evidence on reality of plagiarism and its associated problems in ivory towers particularly in Nigeria. The work primarily focused on addressing plagiarism among university students in Nigeria but, as it has been noted throughout the write-up, achieving effective prevention of plagiarism among students should not be limited to adopting plagiarism software detection alone.*

**Keywords: Plagiarism, Plagiarism detection software, University students, Faculty members, Nigeria.**

## **Introduction**

For decades, scholars, philosophers, educators, social surveyors, and academics have identified different factors responsible for the establishment of Universities worldwide. The factors that have been identified to be responsible for

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establishment of universities are extensive; they range from universities serving as critical components of human development; repository of knowledge; generating and transferring of knowledge to society; and enhancement of economic development, to cite a few (Jason and Dietz, 2011).

Of all the reasons provided by scholars, however, preservation and dissemination of knowledge has been adjudged to be the chief. No wonder, the general belief all over the world is that universities are institutions with ultimate goal to play central role in knowledge economy. Kenny (1998) observed this when he fittingly describes the central role of university as: “Universities are communities of learners” bound together by the “shared goals of investigation and discovery” and that a central part of mission of a University is to ensure that academic staff members and all students participate in the mission. In a bid to participate in the mission, (i.e. research which is regarded as an important aspect of scholarship) some academic staff and students in Universities around the globe have got enmeshed in the quagmire of plagiarism.

Plagiarism, a common form of academic dishonesty is a global academic problem that has seriously bedeviled the academia in recent times (Maina, Maina & Jauro, 2014). Literarily, academic plagiarism connotes the act of stealing, passing off and use of ideas or words of others as one’s new and original ideas or words without crediting the source. Plagiarism occurs frequently among students, academic staff and researchers in many tertiary institutions in the world (Shahabuddin, 2009). Indeed, it is arguably one of the most prominent problems confronting scholarly writing in tertiary institutions. The issue of academic plagiarism is one of the most topical issues in the discourses that border on academic dishonesty and scholarly fraud in tertiary institutions worldwide. As a matter of fact, there are in existence other unresolved academic dishonesty and scholarly fraud issues in higher institutions worldwide, but the issue of the upsurge of problem of plagiarism is more troubling (Bretag, 2013; Singh and Guram, 2014).

As documented in literature and also indicated in the early part of this study, academic plagiarism is a global problem; it is not location-specific and it varies across cultures. In Nigeria, for instance, as it is in all other parts of the continent of Africa, incidence of plagiarism is on the rise despite decades of broad scholarly discussion on how to find enduring panacea to the (Adebayo, 2011; Onwubiko, 2012; Babalola, 2012; Orim, Davies, Borg, & Glendinning, 2013; Onuoha and Ikonne, 2013). In recent times, incessant upsurge in incidence of plagiarism among academic and students in Nigeria, among other factors, has immensely triggered partnership between the Committee of Vice-Chancellors of Nigerian Universities (CVC) and Turnitin Incorporation (an organization that produces plagiarism detection software) so as to put in place an institutional plagiarism mitigation system in the country.

Consequent upon the foregoing, this paper, therefore, aims to draw on existing literature to discuss incidence and factors influencing academic plagiarism among Nigerians in tertiary institutions both within and outside the shores of the country. The study consequently suggests that effective solution to plagiarism in

higher education institutions should not only be hinged on the adoption of plagiarism detection software at the expense of other important university-wide based programs that would assist students to develop strong academic writing skills.

## **Conceptualizing Academic Plagiarism**

Different conceptual analyses and clarifications of academic plagiarism from scholars across various academic disciplines and clime are rife in literature. The fact that this concept has been defined variously by scholars necessitates the need for operational definition that would guide this work. This is necessary because any discourse on academic plagiarism in tertiary institutions would largely be enriched by resolving the elusiveness of a common definition and nebulosity of definitions used by some commentators. Consequent upon this, related definitional analyses of academic plagiarism will be briefly reviewed in this section. Also, attention will be paid to the ambiguity surrounding the concept.

Plagiarism as argued above is a nebulous concept; but traditionally, it can thus be defined as violation of someone else's intellectual property rights. A closer look at the works of scholars such as Rhoades (2008), Onuoha and Ikonne, (2013), describe plagiarism to mean 'the act of adopting and using ideas, thoughts, writing/texts, figures, data, analyses, argumentations, pictures, techniques, computer programs and inventions of others as one's without acknowledging or making proper acknowledgment of the source/s of the work'. For Gibaldi (2003, 66), plagiarism is seen as a violation of someone else's intellectual property rights, a form of academic theft and a moral and ethical offence.

Park, in his own analysis of the concept (2003:472) refers to academic plagiarism as "the theft of words or ideas, beyond what would normally be regarded as general knowledge". He reiterated further that plagiarism is not only limited to theft of words but also of ideas. Though, definitions of academic plagiarism appeared to be many and varied, yet there is consensus that plagiarism is considered as information theft and also a serious offence (Stephen, 2005; Ahmad, 2011). It is deducible from the definitions highlighted above that academic plagiarism entails any unethical use of one's intellectual property, or use of intellectual property of others that deviates from accepted norm. In short, academic plagiarism is a form of theft, a theft of intellectual property; as such it is of interest to criminal law.

As established above, absence of a clear-cut single all-encompassing definition of plagiarism or seemingly lack of agreement on what constitutes it among scholars has produced two different views of the concept. According to Sowden (2005), plagiarism can best be understood from two paradigms i.e. intentional or unintentional/accidental (Devlin & Gray, 2007). On the one hand,

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observations from scholars have shown that not all cases of what is regarded as plagiarism are as a result of unethical and intentional behavior of students. On the other hand, there is another group of students that wittingly and actively present other people's ideas as their own without acknowledging the author of the intellectual property. Understanding of plagiarism along these divides has to a greater extent determined how plagiarism is defined, its forms, trend, and what categories of acts are viewed as plagiarism in different Universities.

A major review of literature and other comprehensive efforts to identify types of plagiarism have led to the following evidence-based conclusions. Precisely, a recent worldwide survey by Turnitin in 2012 has revealed 10 different types of cyber-plagiarism in order of severity of intent.

- Clone - Submitting another's work, word-for-word, as one's own
- CTRL-C - Contains significant portions of text from a single source without alterations
- Find – Replace - Changing key words and phrases but retaining the essential content of the source
- Remix - Paraphrases from multiple sources, made to fit together
- Recycle - Borrows generously from the writer's previous work without citation
- Hybrid - Combines perfectly cited sources with copied passages without citation
- Mash-up - Mixes copied material from multiple sources
- 404 Error - Mixes copied material from multiple sources
- Aggregator - Includes proper citation to sources but the paper contains almost no original work
- Re-tweet - Includes proper citation, but relies too closely on the text's original wording and/or structure.

As accentuated above, academic plagiarism is not a novel phenomenon. It is an on-going issue that has for long bestridden the academic world like a colossus (Scanlon, 2003; Grijalva, Nowell, & Kerkvliet, 2006; Postle, 2009). Desruisseaux (1999), describing the extent of plague of academic plagiarism in tertiary institutions worldwide aptly concludes that, the problem of academic plagiarism is not a recent issue despite the fact that its incidence has grown in scale to the point where it is almost of epidemic proportions.

Aside its timelessness and deepening crisis associated with the malaise within and outside academic circle; academic plagiarism is also seen as an ethically wrong issue. Baird (1980) refers to academic plagiarism as a timeless ethical offence that has been in existence since the beginning of establishment of higher institutions of learning. Literature is awash with different personalities who were once accused of academic plagiarism. Indeed, research focused on academic dishonesty has identified some of the very influential people globally that are culpable of academic plagiarism. Hannis (2004) traced the beginning of stealing of other people's intellectual works to the time of Shakespeare, while Radin (1991)

brought to fore the case of Dr. Martin Luther King who was accused of plagiarism in his undergraduate dissertation due to his poor citation of literature.

Similarly, Quirin Schiermeier, publisher of Nature journal in 2012 accused Romanian Prime Minister Ponta Victor of plagiarizing most part of his 2003 Doctoral thesis in law from other sources without citing bibliographical sources. In Nigeria, former Governor of Central Bank of the country and also the incumbent Emir of Kano, Alhaji Sanusi Lamido Sanusi was once accused of plagiarism and breaching of copyright law (Orim, Davies, Borg, & Glendinning, 2013). The aforementioned cases and many others are indicators that plagiarism is indeed a resiliently growing global academic problem (Bannister, & Thorne, 1997; Anderson, 2001; Fain & Bates, 2002).

## **Nigerian Students and Academic Plagiarism**

The rising incidence of plagiarism among students in universities and other tertiary institutions is not unique to Nigeria. A correspondingly large literature attests to the recent growth of plagiarism in higher institutions of learning in many parts of the world (Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999; Abdolmohammadi & Baker, 2007). For example in Egypt, Nejati, Ismail and Shfaei (2011), discovered that up to 40 per cent of male and 41 per cent of female students claim they give incorrect information when certain works are quoted or cited. In a related manner, a study conducted among the 150 students in University of Pretoria, South Africa, revealed that 80 per cent of participants in the survey admitted that always plagiarize their assignment directly from the internet (Russouw, 2005). Also, McCabe (2003) in his study centered on internet plagiarism which was conducted among 23 different institutions across the United States of America revealed that 38 per cent of his respondents claim they had plagiarized from the internet.

Empirical research into plagiarism among Nigerian students has shown that the problem is rampant in the country. In a study conducted by Babalola among undergraduates in a Nigerian private university in 2012, he found out that 69.2 per cent of his respondent admitted to have been involved in copying and pasting of text from the internet; 65.7 per cent have been involved in copying verbatim from textbooks and journals without proper citation, 46 per cent of his respondents were guilty of copying from their colleagues with their knowledge and permission; while 8.2 of the respondents actually patronize paper mills for term papers. In a related development, Adebayo (2011) also reported 63.6 per cent of respondents in a study he conducted among Nigerian university students were guilty of paraphrasing without proper acknowledgment and citation. Consistent with previous systematic reviews, Onuoha and Ikonne (2013) provided overwhelming evidence that there are disturbing reports about plague of plagiarism at various levels of academic sector in Nigeria.

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Indeed, one of the most astonishing things about academic plagiarism in Nigeria is the degree to which the problem continues to command unswerving rise despite several past cross-cutting efforts to nip the menace in the bud. More worrisome however, is the fact that incidence of academic plagiarism has in recent times become worse with the rapid development of computing and Internet technologies which have made electronic works and texts more accessible to people within a short period of time (Howard, 2000; Weinstein & Dobkin, 2002). To say the least, incidence of plagiarism in academia among Nigerian students has transcended the realm where it was viewed as strictly uncommon occurrence to a worrisome academic problem. In fact, there is a total consonance of views that a significant number of Nigerian students in universities abroad also engage in plagiarism. Orim et. al. (2012) in their findings from a study conducted in a UK University affirmed that Nigerian postgraduate students abroad are not exempted from plagiarism. They maintained that plagiarism among Nigerian postgraduates overseas is a serious problem. There can be no greater indictment of Nigerian Universities than that a significant number of undergraduates and postgraduates in the country are yet to come to terms with the rules and regulations of scholarly academic writing.

### **Some Common Causes of Plagiarism**

There is no consensus as regard factors influencing academic plagiarism in academia, but the fact remains that plagiarism occurs when factors predisposing students to the menace are not addressed. As amply demonstrated in related literature and referred to severally in this work, the spate of academic plagiarism in Nigerian universities has become a matter of grave concern; without mincing words, it remains one of the most debilitating issues facing higher education sector. To this effect, this paper presents common causes of academic plagiarism as identified in relevant literature. Also, its myriad forms and dimensions are not spared.

Assessed against the background of the foregoing, findings of social research have shown that lack of requisite academic writing skills by students in Nigerian universities is a vital determining factor for high incidence of plagiarism (Obinna, 2012; Orim et al., 2013). Academic writing remains one of the ways in which students are to be assessed in universities, to this end; students are expected to acquire this important but rigorous skill. The fact that many students lack this skill explains why rate of plagiarism in academia is on the rise. Also in Obinna's views, poor academic writing skill of many Nigerian students is their albatross, however, he assert that the requisite pillars upon which acquisition of good scholarly writing skills should be hinged are virtually nonexistent in many universities in the country (Obinna, 2012). This in no small measure explains why significant number of Nigerian university students and academic staff are susceptible to plagiarism; thereby creating deep-seated legitimacy and ethical crises for their institutions and the country at large.

Another related factor that explains poor academic writing skills of Nigerian students is the compromised way in which students are tutored and instructions in

intellectual property and academic attribution are given in many universities in country. According to Obinna (2012), regulations regarding timely and rigorous teaching and training of students in the art and science of scholarly writing are no longer adhered to. Only few institutions offer students' development programs that are focused on academic integrity. In essence, the high incidence of academic plagiarism among Nigerian students provides an indication of the extent of erosion of traditional pedagogical practices which were once the norm in academia in the country. Failure to teach students rudiments of academic writing and how to avoid plagiarism pitfalls by academics is recognized as an underlining factor driving much of the cases of plagiarism in many higher institutions in Nigeria. Though, the relationship between lecturer not teaching the rudiments of scholarly writing and rate of involvement of students in the act of plagiarism is less commented on in the literature, the findings of Orim et al. (2012) showed that the level at which students are taught rudiments of writing scholarly paper in Nigerian Universities is low or totally non-existent in some places.

Students' sheer ignorance about rules guiding scholarly writing has also been attributed as a vital factor influencing plagiarism (Wan, Nordin, Halib, and Ghazali, 2011). For instance, Ortom, et al (2012) provided a detailed account of how inadequate understanding of plagiarism of Nigerian students from their previous universities in Nigeria became their albatross as postgraduate students in United Kingdom. This lend credence to the claim that temptation to plagiarize is often high when students cannot decipher at what point one contravenes regulations guiding ethically right scholarly writing skills. Plagiarism could be avoided if university students are well taught about how to search catalogue, paraphrase, search databases for journal articles and understand how useful ideas and text from so many authors should be cited.

Several other factors responsible for high incidence of plagiarism among students have been central focus of many studies. Studies like Bonjean & McGee (1965), Scanlon & Neumann (2002), and Bennett (2005) underscore demographic, individual and situational factors. For Lyer and Eastman (2006), gender is one of the contributing factors. They claim that male and younger students have higher propensity to be involved in plagiarism than female and older students. Other related studies pointed out that students with low CGPA score are more likely to engage in plagiarism than students with higher CGPAs due to their desire for higher grades (Rettinger & Jordan, 2005).

Other related factors are linguistic/cultural background of students and unprecedented availability of large amount of materials and texts on the internet which has made the internet a ready-made pool from which students can copy and paste without hindrances (Weinstein & Dobkin, 2002). Park (2003), Cohen (2004) and Cameron (2007) cited lack of language proficiency as an overriding factor behind plagiarism for some university students. Also, several other studies highlighted factors such as unhealthy competition among students in terms of

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achievement in class and lackadaisical attitudes of academic to plagiarism (Canning, 1956 and Baird, 1980).

### **Addressing Plagiarism in Nigeria's Ivory Towers**

Academic plagiarism, no doubt is a serious form of academic dishonesty in Nigerian universities, and this is well attested to in related literature (Onwubiko, 2012). Upsurge of the vice has elicited reactions with concomitant negative implications for the spread of proper, morally acceptable, qualitative student learning. In fact, high incidence of plagiarism in Nigeria has attracted condemnation of phenomenal sum largely due to its inherent limitations on learning and opportunity to develop higher level cognitive learning skills (Park, 2003; Granitz & Loewy, 2007; Abdolmohammadi & Baker, 2007).

Reacting to the upsurge of academic plagiarism in Nigerian universities, the Committee of Vice Chancellors (CVC) of Nigerian universities recently partnered with a UK Information Technology firm, for the deployment of plagiarism detection software (Turnitin) in Nigerian Universities (Enekano, 2013). While this is a no mean feat and a laudable step from CVC, the fact remains that this step is one-sided and not all-embracing. For clarity sake, there is the need to shed light on Turnitin capabilities.

Turnitin is a software detection service that can assist faculty in the identification of incidences of plagiarism. The software has a database that accommodates more than 10 million students' papers worldwide. Turnitin like many other plagiarism detection systems works by selecting string (number of words or characters) of a particular length from a source document and compare relationship between the strings with that of a target documents (Gillam, Marinuzzi, and Ioannou, 2011).

Adopting plagiarism detection software in Nigerian universities incontrovertibly relays an important message; i.e. dealing with problems confronting intellectual property by catching plagiarists via the use of Turnitin. As a matter of fact, the idea sounds not only reasonable but plausible, but it might not sufficiently tackle the issue of plagiarism and its associated problem in Nigerian universities. This is so because of evidences from some Universities around the globe where Turnitin has been evaluated and which show that the software has several shortcomings and therefore not totally adequate. According to Joyce (2003), application of the software (Turnitin) has several problems and limitations. This author claimed that the software can only search certain published and unpublished works on the internet while manuscripts or works under the so-called invisible web (papers available on the internet via subscribed databases) and loose paraphrasing are beyond what it can search.

Another significant limitation is the fact that Turnitin relies on texts or manuscripts available on the internet, this makes it difficult for this software to detect citation of any phantom paper. Phantom publications are articles that are not in existence and not real but are cited by students. It is beyond the power of any



plagiarism detection software to detect act of plagiarism of student with phantom article.

Also, the free internet-based software that is known as “article rewriter” can be said to have limited what any plagiarism detection software can detect. Article rewriter on the internet rewrites text that is pasted on it in many possible forms within a short period of time. What Plagiarists need to do is to copy and paste any stolen work on article rewriter and click the button with next to get the text re-written as many times as possible.

Another salient downside to over-reliance on the software or any other is the fact that significant number of academics in Nigerian universities. However, since computer dexterity is sine qua non for adopting and using the software, what happens to teeming Nigerian academic that are not computer savvy. potential factor that may mar effectiveness of Turnitin or any other detection software is lack of knowledge about how to use and incorporate the technology especially in Nigeria where reasonable number of academics loath and always distant themselves from anything that requires the use of computers.

Another unexpected and related discovery from certain undergraduates in Redeemer’s University that reveals certain weakness in Turnitin plagiarism detection software is that the software is incapable of detecting stolen work or texts when important words in the work are replaced with appropriate synonyms. For example, a lecturer in Redeemer’s University (in Redeemer’s University academic staff and students adopt Turnitin) noticed that some students resubmitted theses he rejected earlier due to plagiarism. The lecturer was amazed when the same works were re-submitted and scale through Turnitin test with amazing result. However, the lecturer detected later that the same undergraduates’ theses were re-submitted after some words were replaced with synonyms.

In the final analysis, it is important to indicate at this juncture that this positional paper has nothing against the adoption and use of any plagiarism detection software in Nigerian universities. It is also not the intention of the paper to castigate or undermine the effectiveness of any plagiarism detection software. The overarching aim of the paper remains questioning orthodoxies around adoption of plagiarism software so as to bring to light likely blind-spots therein. To this end, the thrust of this work is that plagiarism is ethically wrong, condemnable and should be totally deterred. To achieve this, the paper argues that there should be a shift from total reliance on plagiarism software to assertive and sustained training on scholarly writing nested within related curricula of various universities.

At the core of all these issues is the fact that management, academics and students must play key role in achieving lasting solution to the problem. Successful anti-plagiarism must be correctional, and this requires the university administrators to put in place effective and realizable institutional policies that will

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guide against plagiarism with penalty commensurable to offence committed. Also, management must ensure that robust curricula which include detailed compulsory programs or courses on scholarly writing for students are developed.

Academic staff must be saddled with the responsibility of training and teaching students how to acquire scholarly writing skills and understand rules guiding intellectual property. On the part of the students, they are expected to give scholarly writing the attention it requires. Also, government through the Ministry of Education must serve as watchdog for the concerned institutions. This is necessary so as to help plagiarists recover from their abhorrent act and support acquisition of right attitude and skills needed for scholarly academic writing.

### **Conclusion**

The paper has examined the issue of academic plagiarism in Nigeria, its incidence and how the CVC has adopted Turnitin plagiarism detection software in all universities in the country to mitigate the problem. The paper analyzes upsurge of academic plagiarism in Nigerian universities, which has consequently taken its tolls on the quality of graduates produce, institutional repute and image of the country. Given the inevitable consequences of upsurge of academic plagiarism in many universities in the country, it is important that urgent steps should be taken to address this problem.

To address the problem of academic plagiarism, efforts should not only be geared towards detection alone. This is necessary because of limitations of plagiarism detection software identified in the body of the work. For instance, no plagiarism detection software can detect a student that patronizes paper mill (paper mills are experts in certain disciplines that provide ready-made papers to willing customers for pecuniary gains). Preventing students from engaging in the act should be the key. To achieve this, quality time and resources (human and material) must be put into assisting university students to acquire scholarly writing skills.

Acquisition of scholarly writing skills would automatically create awareness of plagiarism and also help students imbibe the right values. Academic staff should also educate them on how to present one's own idea without necessarily stealing other people's work. There should be teaching or guidance on the use of automated tools to avoid and to detect plagiarism. Education/training has the potential to be a major driver for fighting plagiarism in Nigerian Universities. At best, it opens the heart of students' to new possibilities.

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