

# Awareness and Incidence of Plagiarism among Undergraduates in a Nigerian Private University

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*fairness and academic integrity among student, and by adopting strict policies and sanctions against intentional plagiarism.*

## Keywords

Plagiarism, Undergraduate students, Babcock University, Nigeria

## Abstract

*This study examined students' awareness of plagiarism in Babcock University, one of the earliest established private universities in Nigeria. The study also assessed the incidences of plagiarism among students and the perceived factors responsible for the plagiarism. Out of the 200 copies of a structured questionnaire randomly distributed to students, 169 copies (84.5%) were returned and used for the analysis. The results indicated that most of the students lacked adequate understanding of the behaviours that constitute plagiarism and are thus more likely to commit unintentional plagiarism. Copying from the web without attribution is very common as more than 60% of the students admitted doing that. The ease of accessing information from the Internet, the desire to earn good grades, a poor knowledge of appropriate citing principles and the pressure to meet assignment deadlines were mentioned by the students as the most prominent reasons for plagiarism. A significant positive relationship was found between levels awareness and incidence of plagiarism, indicating that awareness of behaviour that constitutes plagiarism may not deter students from engaging in it. The study recommended that academic institutions should discourage unintentional plagiarism by teaching students the techniques of appropriate summarisation, paraphrasing, citing and referencing, by embarking on value re-orientation to encourage honesty, diligence,*

## Introduction

Among the legacies that quality education bequeaths on its recipients is the capacity to think critically and analytically as well as generate novel ideas. The purpose of university education is to produce creative and original thinkers who can contribute meaningfully to the development of the society. This noble mission is however becoming a Herculean task as the increasing number of literature on academic plagiarism attest to the prevalence of the practice among university students. Like piracy and other forms of copyright infringement, plagiarism violates other people's intellectual property rights. It undermines the principles of honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility, which are fundamental to academics. It devalues the integrity of academic qualifications and discourages students who do not engage in such practices (JISC, 2005). There is therefore a need to understand students' perception of plagiarism and the factors contributing to the prevalence of the practice in order to effectively combat it.

Plagiarism is a derivative of the Latin word 'plagiarius', which means 'kidnapper' or 'abductor'. It is 'the theft of someone's creativity, ideas or language (Williams, 2002). Plagiarism manifests itself in different subtle forms hence some studies have attempted a distinction between deliberate or intentional plagiarism and unintentional plagiarism. Intentional plagiarism is a deliberate act of literary theft. It is designed to deceive, hence, is more difficult

to detect (Park, 2003). Intentional plagiarism includes presenting whole documents written by others as one's own work, buying and presenting papers from paper mills, hiring someone else to write assignments or term papers and including references that were never consulted in work. Unintentional plagiarism, on the other hand, is often borne out of ignorance of citation and referencing rules. It includes copying word for word, either from a print or from an electronic source without acknowledging the source.

Several reasons have been adduced for the rising incidences of academic plagiarism. The most popular is the ease with which information can be retrieved, manipulated and distributed on the Internet. The widespread use of the Internet among students has fostered the 'cut and paste' approach to research. The anonymity of the web and the practice of 'downloading' music, software, games, etc. at no cost from the Internet have gradually eroded the culture of attribution that is fundamental to academic research (Young, 2001). Students generally have the misconception that the Internet is a free source for collecting information without acknowledging the author (Willems, 2003). Furthermore, students are presented with lots of hard to resist temptations to plagiarise on the Internet. The number of paper mills, websites that offer written term papers for a fee, has increased significantly with the advent of Internet technology. Other reasons for academic plagiarism include lack of knowledge of rules for citation and referencing (JISC, 2005), inability to cope with workload and poor time management skills (James, McInnis and Devlin, 2002), pressure to succeed (Introna, *et al.*, 2003), lack of motivation to excel, laziness, cultural differences in learning and presentation styles (Handa and Power, 2005).

Plagiarism has profound consequences not only for the one whose work is plagiarised but also for the plagiarist, the academic community and the society at large. According to the Center for Intellectual Property (n.d.), plagiarism "short-circuits the learning process." When students plagiarise, they deny themselves the mental stimulation and

intellectual development that could result from critical and analytical thinking. Plagiarism also puts institutional reputation at risk as graduates of such universities where academic plagiarism has been widely reported will be poorly rated by employers than their counterparts from other schools. Plagiarism has the tendency to encourage indolence as students learn to take the easy way out of challenging tasks. It kills creativity, innovation and diligence. According to Bensman (1988), students who successfully plagiarise their way through the university are not likely to be honest and hardworking members of the society. Rather, such people would hinder intellectual advance when they have access to status and funds.

### Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

- (1) Do Babcock University students really understand the intellectual behaviours that constitute plagiarism?
- (2) How prevalent is plagiarism among the students?
- (3) Why do the students plagiarise?
- (4) How does awareness of plagiarism correlate with actual plagiarism behaviour by the students?

### Methodology

The survey design method was used for this study. A structured questionnaire was used to capture students' demographic information and assess the levels of awareness and incidences of plagiarism and reasons for plagiarism among Babcock University students. The questionnaire was administered on 200 students, who were randomly selected from different undergraduate disciplines and different levels of study, and from which 169 usable copies (84.5%) of the questionnaire were retrieved and analysed using descriptive statistics and the Spearman ranked correlation method. The frequency distribution of the students by department is shown on table 1.

**Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Respondents by Discipline**

S/N	Discipline	Frequency	Percentage
1	Information Resources	16	9.5
2	Languages and Literary Studies	11	6.5
3	Mass Communication	14	8.3
4	Theology	14	8.3
5	Business Administration	13	7.7
6	Political Science	12	7.1
7	Public Administration	10	5.9
8	Biochemistry	13	7.7
9	Public Health	12	7.1
10	Nursing	13	7.7
11	Computer Information Systems	15	8.9
12	Agriculture and Industrial Technology	9	5.3
13	International Law and Diplomacy	17	10
	<b>Total</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey 2009

## Results

The sample included 98 (58%) female and 71 (42%) male students, who were at the following levels of study of their undergraduate programmes: 100 level (17.7%), 200 level (28.4%), 300 level (24.8%), 400 level (21.8%) and 500 level (7.1%). The very low proportion of students from the 500 level is attributed to the fact that only two departments run five-year programs in the University.

From table 3, the majority of the respondents agreed that the following acts constitute plagiarism: copying word for word from an original source book or journal article (60% of them), submitting an article downloaded from the Internet as assignment (57%), and copying and pasting parts of electronic documents without acknowledgement (54%). However, less than half of the students agreed that the following other acts constitute plagiarism: copying from a colleague’s assignment (44%), not using quotation marks for text copied verbatim from another’s work (36%), not including references in assignment (34%) and including references that were not consulted (32%). These results show a generally low understanding of plagiarism among the respondents, which are likely to result to incidences of unintentional plagiarism.

**Table 2: Perceptions and Understanding of Acts that Constitute Plagiarism**

	<b>Statements about Plagiarism</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b>No response</b>
1	Copying word for word from a book or journal article without acknowledgement	102 (60.3%)	50 (29.6%)	13 (7.7%)	4 (2.4%)
2	Submitting an article downloaded from the Internet as assignment	93 (57%)	48 (29%)	25 (14%)	3 (1.8%)
3	Copying and pasting parts of electronic documents without acknowledgement	90 (54%)	56 (34%)	20 (12%)	7 (4.1%)
4	Copying from a colleague's assignment	73 (44%)	61 (37%)	32 (19%)	3 (1.8%)
5	Not using quotation marks for text copied verbatim from another's work	60 (35.5%)	59 (34.9%)	39 (23%)	11 (6.5%)
6	Not including references in my assignment	58 (34.3%)	83 (49.1%)	21 (12.4%)	7 (4.1%)
7	Including references that I did not use in my work	53 (32%)	81 (49%)	32 (19%)	3 (1.8%)

**Source:** Field Survey 2009

The results in table 3 show that only 8.2% of the respondents admitted to buying term paper from paper mills often. As many as (46%) of them admitted copying from a colleague's assignment with his knowledge or permission, while 4.7% admitted copying from a colleague's assignment without his/her knowledge. Furthermore, 69.2% often copied and pasted portions of text from the Internet; 65.7% often copied verbatim from a textbook or journal without using quotation marks; 58.5% often included

references they did not use in their work and 46.7% often submitted assignments without references. The results for the copying and pasting directly from the Internet and for patronising paper mills suggest that the 'cut and paste' practice is very common, but that buying term papers from the Internet is still novel to a large extent. The fact that transactions on paper mills require the use of credit card which is not common in Nigeria is a possible reason for the low patronage of paper mills among the respondents.

**Table 3: Frequency of Incidences of Plagiarism**

<b>No</b>	<b>Plagiarism Practices</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Not Often</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b>No response</b>
1	Buying term paper or assignments from a 'paper mill'	14 (8.2%)	136 (80.47%)	13 (7.7%)	6 (3.6%)
2	Copying from a colleague's assignment with his knowledge/ permission	78 (46.1%)	69 (40.8%)	18 (10.7%)	4 (2.4%)
3	Copying from a colleague's assignment without his knowledge/ permission	8 (4.7%)	151 (89.3%)	8 (4.7%)	2 (1.2%)
4	Copying verbatim from a textbook or journal without using quotation marks	79 (46.7%)	67 (39.6%)	18 (10.7%)	5 (3%)
5	Copying portions of text from electronic documents without acknowledgement.	117 (69.2%)	39 (23.1%)	10 (5.9%)	3 (1.8%)
6	Submitting assignments without references/ bibliography	111 (65.7%)	72 (42.6%)	14 (8.3%)	4 (2.4%)
7	Including references that I did not use in my work	99 (58.5%)	45 (26.6%)	23 (13.6%)	2 (1.2%)

**Source:** Field Survey 2009

Table 4 shows that most of the respondents 134 (79.3%) plagiarise because information is readily available to download from the Internet; 109 (64.5%) plagiarise because of the need to pass with good grades and 104 (61.5%) plagiarise because they do not know how to cite internet sources. 101 (59.7%) plagiarise in order to meet assignment deadlines; 90 (53.3%) plagiarise because those who engage in the practice often score higher marks; while 64 (37.9%) do so because everybody is doing it. Seventeen per cent of the respondents plagiarise because they do not know how to search the library for materials and because lecturers have never complained about it. This result shows that the commonest reasons

for plagiarism among the respondents is the abundance and ease of accessing information materials from the Internet followed by the need to pass with good grades and inability to cite internet sources correctly.

The final analysis that was carried out is the Spearman ranked correlation analysis. This was done in order to determine the relationship between levels of awareness and understanding of plagiarism and actual practice of plagiarism among the students. The result indicated a significant and positive relationship between the two variables (N= 169.  $r=0.33$ ,  $p= 0.001$ ) suggesting that as awareness of plagiarism increases, incidence of plagiarism also increases.

**Table 4: Reasons for Plagiarism Practices**

	<b>Plagiarism Practices</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Not Often</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b>No response</b>
1	I plagiarise because I do not know how to search the library for materials	28 (16.5%)	121 (71.6%)	15 (8.8%)	5 (3%)
2	There are lots of materials to download free of charge from the internet	134 (79.3%)	19 (11.2%)	10 (5.9%)	6 (3.6%)
3	I need to pass with good grades	109 (64.5%)	41 (24.3%)	10 (5.9%)	9 (5.3%)
4	I plagiarise only when I cannot find enough materials for an assignment	51 (30.2%)	96 (25.4%)	16 (9.5%)	6 (3.6%)
5	I plagiarise in order to meet deadlines for assignments	101 (59.7%)	27 (32.5%)	35 (20.7%)	6 (3.6%)
6	I do not know how to cite internet sources	104 (61.5%)	34 (20.1%)	25 (14.8%)	6 (3.6%)
7	My lecturers have never complained about it	30 (17.8%)	91 (53.8%)	38 (22.5%)	10 (5.9%)
8	Everybody is doing it	64 (37.9%)	41 (24.3%)	56 (33.1%)	8 (4.7%)
9	Those who plagiarise often get higher marks	90 (53.3%)	35 (20.7%)	38 (22.4%)	6 (3.6%)
10	I plagiarise when the assignment is too difficult	53 (31.8%)	80 (47.3%)	29 (17.1%)	7 (4.1%)

**Source:** Field Survey 2009

## Discussion

The findings of this study show that most of the students admit to copying all or some parts of a print or electronic document without attribution as plagiarism, but failed to identify correctly as plagiarism the more subtle forms of plagiarism such as not using quotation marks when copying word for word and including sources that are not consulted in references. This shows that the students are more prone to committing unintentional plagiarism. This finding corroborates the study of Tsang and Aaron (2005) who observed that most of the computer science students they studied did not have a clear understanding of plagiarism as they were only able to correctly identify very few of the 12 plagiarism scenarios presented to them. Marshall and Garry (2005) in their study of the perceptions of plagiarism among students from English speaking and non-English speaking background reported that the students could not recognise the subtle forms of plagiarism. Pupovac, Bilic-Zulle and Petrovecki (2008) also noted that most students plagiarise because they lack an understanding of what constitutes plagiarism or its consequences. JISC (2005) and Cohen (2003) both concluded that most of the students who plagiarise do so out of ignorance of citation principles.

With respect to the incidences of plagiarism, most of the respondents had copied directly from print and electronic materials without acknowledging the sources. This finding corroborates the submission of Marshall and Garry (2005) that copying from the Web is more common among students than copying from books. In addition, the practice of copying assignments between students seems to be also common as almost half of the students admitted doing this. This shows that the students do not see anything wrong with sharing assignment. Such practice might not be out of place among young people who are used to sharing pictures, video and audio files with one another.

Other findings of this study show that apart from availability of information on the Internet, the desire to earn good grades, poor knowledge of citation principles and the pressure to meet deadlines were the major reasons for academic plagiarism among Babcock University students. Dordoy (2002)

reported a similar finding that the need to get better grades and poor time management were the most popular reasons why students plagiarise. These findings imply that students are more interested in getting better grades which they regard as a means to earning an academic degree and employment. Such instrumental attitude defeats the purpose of academic endeavour.

The findings further show that the ease of access to information materials from the Internet was the most common reason for plagiarism among students. Several studies have reported similar findings (Armstrong and Delbridge, 2008; JISC, 2005; Oliphant 2002). The desire to earn good grades was the second most popular reason for plagiarism among Babcock students, followed by a poor knowledge of citation principles and the pressure to meet deadlines. Pupovac, Bilic-Zulle and Petrovecki (2008) assert that students would plagiarise in order to meet assignment deadlines even though they are aware that such a practice is dishonest. Tsang and Aaron (2005) also found no significant relationship between awareness of what counts as plagiarism and intentional plagiarism. The positive relationship that was found in the present study between levels of awareness and incidences of plagiarism tends to corroborate these findings and leads to inescapable conclusion that other reasons than poor awareness and understanding of plagiarism, including those mentioned above, could be responsible for plagiarism by students. Thus, improving students' awareness of plagiarism through training would not be enough to discourage it, unless there are effective institutional strategies and policies to discover and sanction such acts.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Although plagiarism is not a new phenomenon, the alarming rate of incidence among university students has made it an issue of concern. Access to databases of information enabled by information and communication technology, especially the Internet has been blamed for the prevalence of the practice. However, since the Internet will continue to play an important role in teaching, learning and research, each institution must be ready to take decisive steps towards curtailing plagiarism because of its far reaching effects on academic scholarship and the society. Based on the findings of this study, it is

recommended that academic institutions should:

- Adopt well publicised institutional policies that clearly define plagiarism behaviours and their consequences.
- Ensure that students are well-tutored in reading comprehension and techniques of paraphrasing, summarising, use of synonyms and different citing and referencing conventions.
- Improve the delivery and content of relevant general education courses such as the use of library and use of English.
- Conduct seminars on time management to help students learn how to allocate time to their coursework and extra-curricular activities.
- Embark on value re-orientation to encourage honesty, diligence, fairness and academic integrity among undergraduate students.

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