

# African Research Review

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*An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia*

*Vol. 3 (4), July, 2009*

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

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## **Evaluating Students' Plagiarism in Higher Education Institutions (Pp. 363-371)**

**Agu, Ngozi N.** - Department of Educational Foundations, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

E-mail: [ngozi\\_uj@yahoo.com](mailto:ngozi_uj@yahoo.com).

**Olibie, Eyiuche** - Utchac Educational Konsults, 35a New Market Road, Onitsha

E-mail: [utchackonsults@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:utchackonsults@yahoo.co.uk).

**Anyikwa, Ngozi** - Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State Nigeria.

### **Abstract**

*Plagiarism is a threat to students' empowerment in higher education in a knowledge economy. In this paper the phenomenon of students' plagiarism in higher education institutions and how it disempowers the advancement of global knowledge by students, are discussed. The paper begins with a description of the meaning, forms and reasons for plagiarism among students. It goes further to discuss some strategies for evaluating and detecting plagiarism in students' works using Information technology. Finally some knowledge empowerment strategies are presented to show how lecturers could tackle plagiarism by empowering students to be genuine in receiving and producing information for constructing new knowledge.*

### **Introduction**

As one of the major players in knowledge economy, higher education institutions have become increasingly under pressure to be both competitive and excellent in research and teaching. This implies that higher education

institutions are expected to produce works that are novel and contribute meaningfully to knowledge advancement. However, excellence in research and teaching would be unrealistic in the face of students' plagiarism that is being witnessed globally. Plagiarism means dishonest copying of other peoples work. Iyela (2002) described it as entirely copying another person's work without acknowledging the author whose work has been plagiarized. Harris (2004:4) noted that:

Plagiarism is using another person's words or ideas without giving credit to the other person. When you use someone else's words, you must put quotation marks around them and give the writer or speaker credit by revealing the source in a citation. Even if you revise or paraphrase the words of someone else or just use their ideas, you still must give the author credit in a note. Not giving due credit to the creator of an idea or writing is very much like lying.

Plagiarism is therefore a dishonest act in which students copy other people's essays, term papers and other research works and present them as their own inventions. Students plagiarize in classroom assignment, term papers, seminar papers and writing of projects, thesis or dissertations. The availability of textual materials in electronic format has made plagiarism easier than ever. As Ugwueze & Ifekwem (2008) opined, the internet has opened up new possibilities for research topics and has reduced the problem of searching for information (data) for educational research. However, many students use the internet as a source for plagiarism. Copying and pasting of paragraphs or even entire essays now can be performed with just a few mouse clicks.

Plagiarism on research papers takes many forms. Some of the most common as cited by Harris (2004) include:

- a. downloading a free research paper,
- b. buying a paper from a commercial paper mill;
- c. copying an article from the Web or an online or electronic database,
- d. copying a paper from a local source (papers may be copied from students who have taken your course previously, from fraternity files, or from other paper-sharing sources near campus).

- e. cutting and pasting to create a paper from several sources and quoting less than all the words copied,
- f. copying from the source verbatim without any quotation marks at all, but adding a citation, implying that the information is the student's summary of the source, faking a citation.

### **Reasons for Students' Plagiarism**

There are many reasons why students plagiarise. Some investigations into why students plagiarise reveal the following:

1. **Efficiency gain:** Morgan (2005) noted that students plagiarise to get a better grade and to save time. Some cheat because of what Straw (2002) calls 'the GPA thing', so that cheating becomes 'the price of an A' (Whiteman & Gordon, 2001). Auer & Krupar (2001) identify a strong consumer mentality amongst students, who seem to believe that 'they should get grades based on effort rather than on achievement'. Fear of a bad grade and inability to perform cause some students to look for a superior product, thereby plagiarising.
2. **Inadequacies in educational contexts:** Inadequacies such as lack of research facilities in universities, low morale of lecturers leading to incessant strikes and poor supervision, poor and irrelevant curriculum content, unchallenging lecture methodology, and absence of learning facilities could be directly linked with students' plagiarism. Akuezulo (2006) noted that under funding in Nigeria universities has led to severe lack of facilities for effective teaching and learning. Obanya (2007) argued that the Nigerian philosophy of education was vague because it failed to express succinctly the competencies and skills expected of a graduate. Rather it emphasized the degree and certificates to be awarded to students. The result is excessive examinations, non-functionality of youth learning, and a situation whereby students are willing to do anything to obtain certificates.
3. **Time management and poor academic planning:** There are many calls on student's time, including peer pressure for an active social life, commitment to sports and performance activities, family responsibilities and pressure to complete multiple work assignments in short amounts of time (Park, 2003). Little wonder that Silverman (2002) concluded that students' overtaxed lives leave them so vulnerable to the temptations of

cheating. Many students have poor time management and planning skills. Some students are just procrastinators, while others do not understand the hours required to develop a good research paper, and they run out of time as the due date looms. Thus, they are most tempted to copy a paper when time is short and they have not yet started the assignment.

4. **Genuine lack of understanding:** Some students plagiarise unintentionally, when they are not familiar with proper ways of quoting, paraphrasing, citing and referencing and/or when they are unclear about the meaning of common knowledge and the expression in their own words. Some have learning problems that makes it difficult for them to understand and transfer what they learnt. They might resort to plagiarism as a way out.
5. **Personal values/attitudes:** Some students see no reason why they should not plagiarise or do it because of social pressure, because it makes them feel good or because they regard short cuts as clever and acceptable. Some students cheat because they have negative student attitudes towards assignments and tasks that teachers think have meaning but they do not (Howard, 2002). They may also regard the task set as neither important nor challenging.
6. **Temptation and opportunity:** Morgan (2005) noted that it is both easier and more tempting for students to plagiarise as information becomes more accessible on the Internet and web search tools make it easier and quicker to find and copy. Students are natural economizers. Obanya (2007) agreed that many students are interested in the shortest route possible through a course. Copying a paper sometimes looks as the shortcut through an assignment or project, especially when the student feels overloaded with work already.
7. **Lack of deterrence:** To some students, the benefits of plagiarising outweigh the risks, particularly if they think there is little or no chance of getting caught and there is little or no punishment if they are caught (Davis & Ludvigson, 1995). To others, plagiarism is a tangible way of showing dissent and expressing a lack of respect for authority. A few students like the thrill of rule breaking. The more angrily you condemn plagiarism, the more they can hardly wait to do it.

One could go on and on but the list is not exhaustive. But the fact remains that many students plagiarise and accept plagiarism as the norm. These negatively affect excellence in teaching and learning needed from higher education institutions for the sustenance of a knowledge economy.

### **Strategies for Evaluating and Detecting Plagiarism in Students' Works**

In the light of the disempowering potentials of plagiarism to the knowledge economy, it would be useful to present some tips to detecting plagiarism using information technology and other strategies. Harris (2004) provided a long list of actions that would help to detect plagiarism in students work. These include:

1. **Look for the Clues.** As you read the papers, look for internal evidence that may indicate plagiarism. Among the clues are the following:
  - a) Mixed citation styles. If some paragraphs are cited in MLA style, while other references are in APA, and perhaps one or two are in CBE or Chicago, you are probably looking at a paste-up.
  - b) Lack of references or quotations. Lengthy, well written sections without documentation may have been taken from general knowledge sources, such as encyclopedias, popular magazines, or Web sites.
  - c) Off topic. If the paper does not develop one of the assigned topics or even the topic it announces, it may have been borrowed at the last minute or downloaded. Similarly, if parts of the paper do develop the subject, but other parts seem oddly off, the product may be a cut and paste.
  - d) Signs of datedness. If there are no references after some well past date (e.g. 1985), or if a data table offers a company's sales from 1989 to 1994, either the student is using very old material or the paper itself is rather old.
  - e) Anachronisms. If the paper refers to long-past events as current ("Only after the Military Regime is over will we see a sound education system" or "Why isn't the Obasanjo administration acting on this?"), you almost certainly have a recycled paper on your hands.
  - f) Anomalies of diction. Many undergraduates do not understand the concept of levels of diction. They think all words are equally welcome in every paper. As a result, when those who plagiarize with the cut-and-

paste method perform their deeds, they often mix paragraphs of varying levels together. Lastly, if you find that the paper uses several archaic terms, or words no longer used in the way the paper uses them, you may be looking at some very old text.

- g) Smoking guns. This category might be called "blunders of the clueless," since it includes obvious indicators of copying. Reported in the past have been labels left at the end of papers ("Thank you for using TermPaperMania"), title pages stapled to Web printouts (complete with dates and URL in the corners), title pages claiming the paper is by Tom Jones when subsequent pages say "Smith, page 2," and papers with whiteout over the previous author's name.

**2. Search for the Paper Online.** Before you begin to search for the source or sources of a suspect paper, you should know where to look. Here are the major sources of text in electronic form:

- Free and for-sale term paper sites. As mentioned earlier, there is a list of many of these sites at [Termpapers.com](http://www.termpapers.com) at <http://www.termpapers.com> and at "Internet Paper Mills" at <http://www.coastal.edu/library/mills2.htm>.
- The free, visible Web. This category includes all the publicly mounted Web pages, which are indexed by search engines.
- The free, invisible Web. This category includes the contents of sites that provide articles free to users, but that content may be accessible only by going directly to the site. That is, the articles are not indexed by search engines and therefore cannot be located by using a search engine. Some magazines, newspapers, reference works, encyclopedias, and subject-specific sites are in this category.
- Paid databases over the Web. This category includes commercial databases for consumers (such as Northern Light's Special Collection) and databases that libraries subscribe to, containing scholarly journals, newspapers, court cases and the like. Providers like Lexis-Nexis, UMI Proquest, Infotrac, JSTOR and others are in this group. To find information from this category, you must have access to the database (through password or an on-campus computer) and search on the database directly.

- CD-ROM resources. Encyclopedias and some databases are available on CD-ROM.
- If you find nothing with these tools, try several of the large-database, full-text search engines like Google, Northern Light, Fast Search, or "World Wide Web Research Tools" and perform an exact phrase search on a four-to-six-word phrase from a suspect part of the paper (find a phrase that has two or three relatively unusual words in it). Remember that no search engine covers more than about a third of the visible Web, so you should try several engines before you give up.
- You might also try using software. See [The Plagiarism Resource Center](#) for more information. Here are some of the on-line and CD-Rom services: Plagiarism.com at <http://www.plagiarism.com>, Plagiarism.org at <http://www.plagiarism.org>. Plagiarism Finder at <http://www.m4-software.com>, Eve at <http://www.canexus.com/eve/>.
- It is sometimes said that the best plagiarism detector is the student who handed in the paper, because he or she already knows whether or not the paper is genuine, or what part is fraudulent. Therefore, you can sometimes enlist the student's help. You must be very careful about accusing a student of cheating unless you have clear proof, because a false accusation can be both cruel and reason for litigation. With the appropriately serious demeanour and tone, a well phrased question or discussion will often result in a confession

### **Recommendations**

In view of the information presented in the foregoing sections, some recommendations are made as follows:

- 1) Higher education institutions should make clear policies on students' plagiarism. Such policies should be communicated to students in written form.
- 2) Lecturers should use identified knowledge empowering strategies to teach students so that they can acquire the ability to learn, transfer learning and avoid plagiarism.
- 3) Lecturers should devote more time to the supervision of students' works so that they can detect plagiarism and penalise as appropriate.
- 4). Government should make the Nigerian educational context more relevant by setting out clear expectations of graduate learning out-comes,

motivating staff and providing adequate facilities for meaningful learning.

- 5) Students should avoid plagiarism at all costs. They should engage in meaningful work that will contribute to excellence in higher education.

### **Conclusion**

Knowledge, they say is power and knowledge is acquired by authentic learning. Students' plagiarism is inhibitive of knowledge empowerment and has been exacerbated with the advent of the Internet. Lecturers must tackle students' plagiarism. They must empower students to be genuine in receiving and producing information for constructing new knowledge. It would be timely if, as part of this important initiative in higher education for youth empowerment, to initiate efforts, spark ideas, share practice and continue to shape the vision for the future by tackling students' plagiarism and empowering students for the knowledge economy.

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