

Dealing with the Plague of Plagiarism in Nigeria

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Abstract

Growing incidents of plagiarism seem to plague tertiary institutions in Nigeria and the world in general especially with the advent of the Internet. The aim of this paper, therefore, was to draw on existing literature to offer steps that could be taken in dealing with the plague of plagiarism. The study concludes with a summary of findings from literature and outlines various measures that can be taken by governing bodies, lecturers and students to maintain an environment of academic integrity free from the menace of plagiarism.

Keywords: Academic Integrity; Plagiarism; Tertiary Institutions.

Introduction

The term plagiarism has received much attention in recent times as incidents of plagiarism seem to be on the increase. With the advent of the Internet, information is more easily accessible without geographical constraints; hence researchers can now lay their hands on documents in any part of the world. Although, this is a laudable development considering that scholars develop new ideas while learning from the writings of others (Coulthard 2004), some researchers, however, prefer to steal the ideas of others rather than learn from their work. Okeke (2001) points out that the plague of plagiarism can be attributed to an educational system that seems to produce fake intellectuals, who merely endure education while stealing the work of others as cover up.

Although plagiarism is a universal problem, incidents of plagiarism are becoming increasingly popular in most Nigerian institutions of higher learning as students employ what is commonly known as “cut and paste” when doing assignments or carrying out research projects. Udotong as cited by Obinna (2012) sadly notes that plagiarism and poor writing skills are the bane of Nigeria’s educational system. This is understandably so as plagiarism affects not only the integrity of the individual concerned but also the integrity of the institution associated with the individual.

Literature review

Nature of plagiarism

The Latin root for the word, *plagiare*, according to Sharkey & Culp (2005) means to kidnap. To plagiarise therefore involves an action of taking by force that which belongs to someone else. It is the theft of someone’s intellectual property. Hence, Hexham (1999) notes that the common definition of *plagiarism* is theft. Wilson (2007) as cited in Grantham (2009) outlined different types of plagiarism as: copying an entire source and presenting it as one's own; copying sections from a source without proper acknowledgement; paraphrasing materials from a source without proper acknowledgement; presenting another person's work with or without their knowledge; buying an essay/paper from a research service, another student or an online site. The American Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers according to Posner (n.d.) went further to explain acts of plagiarism to include where: no credits were given with the verbatim copy of a full text; no credits were given with the verbatim copy of a large section of a text; no credits given with the verbatim copy of individual elements like sentences, paragraphs and illustrations; no credits given with the paraphrasing of pages or paragraphs with only minor alterations like changing words or phrases or the original sentence order and giving some credits but not indicating clearly who wrote the original.

Reasons for plagiarism

Although plagiarism is an ancient crime which can be said to have existed before the arrival of the Internet, the Internet has no doubt given it much impetus (Stebelman 1998; Trinchera 2001; McCabe et al., 2001; McMurry, 2001; Babalola 2012). The ease in copying associated with the Internet makes it attractive for students to cut and paste. Anderson (1999) and Whiteneck (2002) also point out the abundance of online entrepreneurs exploiting the commercial possibilities of the student market by providing online term paper mills which makes it easy for students to buy written papers. Other reasons for committing plagiarism are: lack of consequences for those who plagiarise and perception of task as boring (Grantham, 2009); perception of plagiarism as a reasonable risk-free way out of difficulties (Bannister & Ashworth, 1998); lack of understanding; time management; defiance; temptation and opportunity (Park, 2003).

Although students may engage in acts of plagiarism intentionally, some students unknowingly plagiarize because they are unclear of what constitutes a quotation or paraphrase and how to cite properly (Insley, 2011; Wan et al 2011). Corroborating this fact, Gabriel (2010) reports two separate incidents at Rhode Island College and the University of Maryland. At Rhode Island College, a freshman copied and pasted from a Web site’s frequently asked questions page about homelessness and did not think he needed to credit a source in his assignment

because the page did not include author information. At the University of Maryland a student was reprimanded for copying from Wikipedia, and when questioned the student said he thought unsigned and collectively written entries did not need to be credited since they counted, essentially, as common knowledge.

Depth of plagiarism

Plagiarism.org (2012) reports the result of a survey published in Education Week in which 54% of students admitted to plagiarizing from the Internet; 74% of students admitted that at least once during the past school year they had engaged in "serious" cheating; and 47% of students believe their teachers sometimes chose to ignore students who are cheating. Ryan as cited in Sharma (2011) while reporting incidents of plagiarism affirmed that she caught an average of 18% of the students in her graduate-level information security classes plagiarizing large portions of papers. In another study carried out in Egypt, Nejati, Ismail & Shafaei (2011) found out that the most common forms of plagiarism behaviours among Egyptian students are "giving incorrect information about the source of a quotation", with 40% of male and 41% of female students sometimes doing it, and "changing words but copying the sentence structure of a source without giving credit", with 34% of male and 33% of female students doing it. A recent US study, found out that over 50% of university students engage in some form of Internet-based academic cheating during their university career (Breen & Maassen, 2005). The University of Pretoria reports that in a study on plagiarism conducted among 150 undergraduates, 80% of the participants admitted that they often plagiarized assignments directly from the Internet (Russouw, 2005). In another survey of college student attitudes towards Internet plagiarism by Scanlon & Neumann (2002) nearly 90 % of 698 students in nine universities agreed that copying and pasting text from Internet or traditional sources without proper citation is wrong, yet about 25% admitted to having copied without proper citation. A survey by McCabe (1992) also revealed that 67.4% of the respondents cheated at least once on a test or major assignment.

In a study on awareness and incidence of plagiarism among undergraduates in a Nigerian private university, Babalola (2012) found out that 8.2% of the respondents bought term paper from paper mills often, (46%) 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. However, 69.2% of the respondents admitted to copying and pasting 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. Adebayo (2011) while examining common cheating behaviour among Nigerian university students equally found out that paraphrasing materials without source acknowledgement was practiced by 63.6% of the respondents. In a study by Adeniyi & Taiwo (2011), majority of the respondents seemed to blame lecturers especially in the area of student plagiarism as they affirmed that lecturers play little role in guiding students. Although plagiarism is often associated with students, the plague actually cuts across different sectors of the society as sometimes lecturers who are supposed to guide students are themselves caught in the act. Adeyemo (2013) for instance affirms the outright dismissal of four university lecturers at the University of Calabar Nigeria for plagiarism. Chiedozie (2012) also reports the case of a United States-based Nigerian lecturer who sued the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Dr. Lamido Sanusi, for allegedly plagiarising his works. Plagiarism is, therefore, not limited to a particular class of people, country, colour or gender as it can be seen in different sectors of the society.

Dealing with plagiarism

Despite the magnitude of plagiarism within and outside institutions of higher learning all over the world, Aaron (1992), in a study based on a survey of 257 chief academic officers, found that few faculty discussed cheating in class; few institutions provided student development programs focused on academic integrity, and almost none made an effort to assess the extent of cheating on their campus. In order to prevent plagiarism, East (2009), however, argues that promoting standards of academic integrity should be a major concern of universities. Hinman (2000), points out three approaches to curbing academic dishonesty which can be directly applied to plagiarism as: 'Police', 'Virtues' and 'Prevention' approaches. The 'Police' approach according to the author, has to do with paying attention to catching and punishing students involved in academic dishonesty which of course includes plagiarism. The 'Virtues' approach focuses on boosting students' moral and ethical values to the point that academic dishonesty will have no temptation value for them. The 'Prevention' approach providing conditions that discourage students from cheating by check-mating every possible opportunity for students to engage in dishonest behaviour.

Sharma (2011) maintains that plagiarism prevention needs close institutional and teacher's cooperation. This is understandable because, no matter how much an institution wants to uphold academic integrity, it can not do so without the lecturer who relates directly with the students. It is in line with this that Rabkin as cited in Young (2012) argues that cases of plagiarism are teachable moments. In other words, every act of plagiarism should provide an opportunity for a lecturer to guide a student on how to cultivate academic virtue by doing the right

thing. As a means of helping students avoid plagiarism, Schuetze (2004), for instance, used homework assignments to help students understand plagiarism. For each assignment, students were asked to read a page of text from a published manuscript with all citations removed. They then indicated which sentences they thought should have a citation. Students received feedback after the first assignment, and were found to have fewer citation problems in a subsequent term paper. Students who completed the homework assignments were also found to perform better in identifying plagiarism when compared with students in another course section who did not participate in the homework assignments. Agreeing to the lecturers' role in guiding students against plagiarism, Grantham (2009) argues that the conventions of citing sources and compiling bibliographies should be taught explicitly.

In as much as students should be properly taught to avoid plagiarism using the 'virtue approach', there is also the need for lecturers to apply the 'police approach' to detect erring students. Harris (2012) outlines a variety of methods for detecting plagiarism. According to the author, entering a string of suspicious text, enclosed in quotation marks, often locates articles or web pages containing the phrase. Keeping copies of assignments turned in by students who had taken the course previously also helps in detecting students who may decide to turn in assignments previously submitted by other students for the same course. The presence of mixed citation styles or unusual formatting in one assignment according to the author is a sign of paste up or what is popularly known as 'cut and paste'. Also lack of reference or quotation for lengthy well written sections of an assignment is an indicator of plagiarism which should be followed up by the lecturer.

In order to track down plagiarism, Jocoy & DiBiase (2006) point out that free online search engines such as Google allow instructors to track down copied phrases, while commercially available plagiarism detection software and online services (e.g., *EVE*; *Turnitin.com*) compare individual student papers to Web documents and/or to essay databases to find and report instances of matching text. In a positive development, Universities news (2013) reports that Nigeria is the first African country to introduce plagiarism detection software on a nationwide basis as not less than 123 Nigerian universities are uniting forces to deploy top anti-plagiarism software to check the integrity of academic work.

As a means of utilizing the 'Prevention approach' which places conditions that discourage students from cheating, Nakate (2011) affirms that offenders of plagiarism should be punished. The author, however, explains that the punishment should depend upon gravity of the act and suggests that in case of unintentional or unwanted plagiarism, the teacher or professor penalizes the student by making him to rewrite the assignment while the student fails the course where plagiarism is proven to be intentional. Many universities, according to the author, impose a ban on enrolling for a course till the next 5 years in cases affecting graduate students.

Lessons for tertiary institutions in Nigeria

Going from the literature reviewed a lot of lessons can be taken home for tertiary institutions in Nigeria in order to maintain academic integrity. It is obvious that the plague of plagiarism must not be allowed to continue its spread and as such all stake holders within the academic community (governing bodies, lecturers and students) must join forces to successfully eradicate it.

Lessons for governing bodies

The quality of student admission should be reviewed. As Okeke (2001) rightly pointed out, the educational system seems to produce fake intellectuals who merely endure education while stealing the works of others as cover up. If students are properly screened prior to admission, using both oral and written examinations, it might be possible for examiners to assess applicants' level of self expression and motivation for pursuing a university education. This would no doubt boost the quality of admissions, thereby reducing the production of the so called 'fake intellectuals' who cannot reason for themselves but merely rely on stealing the work of others to graduate. There is also need for written institutional policies on plagiarism that are well understood by lecturers and students as this will not only help in the prevention of plagiarism but also lead to an understanding of the institution's stand on plagiarism.

Lessons for lecturers

Lecturers are not left out in the fight against plagiarism. As teachers, lecturers should guide students properly. This is particularly important as the study of Adeniyi & Taiwo (2011) reveals that students often blame lecturers for playing little role in guiding them against plagiarism. Several authors (Grantham 2009; Gabriel 2010; Insley 2011; Rabkin as cited in Young 2012) agree that instructing students on plagiarism and teaching them to cite properly is key to preventing plagiarism. For students in Nigeria this is particularly important as Udotong as cited by Obinna rightly pointed out that the bane of Nigeria's educational system lies in the poor writing skills of students. Using creative assignments that demand originality, lecturers can also discourage the cut and paste mentality as such assignments would demand that students reason for themselves.

While institutional policies can provide guidelines for plagiarism prevention, the task of plagiarism detection lies directly with lecturers due to their close contact with students. Lecturers are to identify acts of plagiarism and

report such to appropriate authorities. As noted by Harris (2012) lecturers can do a lot to detect plagiarism. After detecting plagiarism, lecturers should make it a habit to report cases to appropriate quarters so that culprits do not go unpunished. This is particularly important as reasons for engaging in plagiarism is often associated with lack of punishment (Grantham 2009; Plagiarism. Org 2012).

As mentors, there is need for lecturers to show good examples. Situations where lecturers are caught in the act of plagiarism is not only disgraceful but can be an impetus for students to engage in the act themselves. Lecturers should also see each class period as an opportunity to impact positive values. Teaching against stealing, even if it restricted to stealing someone's intellectual property, would help students not only to think for themselves academically, but also groom them to become better citizens as they learn to appreciate what belongs to others.

Lessons for students

On the side of the students, efforts should be made to avoid unintentional plagiarism. This can be achieved through a purposeful search for knowledge using available resources in books and the Internet. There are so many free materials on the Internet on how to avoid plagiarism. There are also several free citation management tools available on the Internet such as BibDesk; BibMe; Bibus; CiteULike and Mendeley which can assist with different citation styles. The promotion of plagiarism by allowing one's classmates to copy assignments should also be discouraged because when classmates know that they are not likely to have access to the work of others, they see reason to do the work themselves.

Conclusion

Plagiarism is a menace throughout the academic world. It is an epidemic eating through the fabric of academic integrity. Available literature admits critical need for eradicating it through the combined efforts of all stake holders within the academic community such as governing bodies, lecturers and students. Each group must identify their role and work towards maintaining an academic environment free from the plague of plagiarism.

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