

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF INSTITUTIONAL INTERVENTIONS ON PLAGIARISM: NIGERIAN CASE

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Abstract: In the last ten years, there has been much research into academic integrity with a focus on plagiarism in developed countries. There is still a dearth of such research in developing countries like Nigeria.

This paper presents the results from a larger exploratory study on student plagiarism in Nigerian Higher Education Institution of Learning (Nigerian universities), which is associated with the Impact of Plagiarism Policies in Higher Education Across Europe (IPPHEAE) project.

It seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge by focusing on the experiences of previous institutional interventions on student plagiarism issues and their impact on student experience when they study elsewhere.

Nigerian students studying abroad had to adapt to diverse teaching, learning and assessment styles under a different institutional system. This resulted in the students struggling when they had to apply skills they had not acquired during their previous study.

This study adopted a mixed method approach; 25 Nigerian Postgraduate Students studying in a United Kingdom University were interviewed for the qualitative data and 171 IPPHEAE student questionnaires were completed for the quantitative data.

Results from the data suggest that the previous institutional system experienced by the students was quite different from what they met in their present institutions of study in England. As a result, the students struggled to cope with their studies when they had to apply skills they had not acquired.

Key words: Nigerian universities, IPPHEAE, students' experience, student plagiarism, student mobility

Introduction

Currently, due to the industry requirements in Nigerian organizations and a drive for professional improvement, there has been an increase in the influx of Nigerian students to overseas universities for postgraduate studies. These students were classified as international students, relative to their country of origin. Deckert (1993) referred to international students as a group of students for whom English is not their language of origin and who regularly risk being accused of plagiarism. Because of the shared desire for success on the part of the students and the institutions in which they have been accepted, there is a need to understand their previous academic background, the challenges they face while studying in the new academic background and the impact the previous experience has on their overall learning experience.

This study seeks to add to the recent study in this area by exploring the previous experiences of Nigerian postgraduate students in a United Kingdom university. This research aims at contributing to knowledge in the area of the impact of previous institutional interventions on the academic experience of Nigerian students who travel overseas to further their education.

Literature Review

One of the principles for effective teaching and learning is the promotion of the active engagement of the student as learner. Active engagement takes into account the various types of learning styles of the students and ensures that each is catered for in the course of study. David (2012: 18) suggests that the main aim of higher learning should be learners' independence and autonomy. This, she believes, is evidenced in the "active engagement of students in their learning, ensuring they acquire a repertoire of learning strategies and practices, develop positive learning dispositions and build the confidence to take ownership of their learning". When this is achieved, deep learning is said to have taken place. In line with this, social development theory suggests that when learning takes place, there is the ability to make an inner form of transfer from what is learnt to what is said or written for assessment (Vygotsky 1978). This theory suggests that the learning from an assessment can be compromised by the students in several ways, which will result in the transfer failing to take place or being ineffective. There are several forms of academic misconduct that result to the compromise of assessment results. Some of these are: cheating, collusion and plagiarism. This study has focused on plagiarism.

Park (2003) framed plagiarism as a form of academic malpractice. He describes it as a breach of academic integrity and defines it as "the theft of words or ideas, beyond what would normally be regarded as general knowledge" (Park, 2003: 472).

Like Park (2003), Carroll defines plagiarism as "submitting someone else's work as your own" (2007: 13). She further said that despite the fact that she defined it so simply; the actual phrase may represent more meaning than it appears to. She explained "submitting" in terms of handing in some work for the purpose of academic credit. "Someone else's work" was depicted as inappropriately referenced piece for submission. So many attempts have been made at the definition and other studies have shown that different understandings of the same word are held by teachers and students (Delvin 2003; Shi 2004). This raises a need for consistency in its definition and application.

Studies carried out in this area further suggest that most students who admit plagiarising suggest that it occurred as a result of issues including: "... lack of intent"; "... lack of awareness"; "... lack of the proper skills". These instrumental conceptualizations contrast with viewing plagiarism as an ethical issue, which places it in the arena of ethical reasoning. It is well known that the "ethical climate" (Victor and Cullen, 1993) of an organization represents the shared perceptions of what ethically correct behavior is and how ethical issues should be handled.

Organizational ethical context is basically the factors affecting the ethical judgment of people in an organisation (Pasternak, nd). The two main areas are the ethical climate and the ethical culture. Organizational ethical culture is the way things are done in a given organization and represents a whole range of several "formal" and "informal" systems of behaviour control capable of resulting in either ethical or unethical behavior (Trevino et. al, 1998).

Some of these formal systems are factors such as training programs, policies, authority structure, leadership, reward systems, penalty systems, while the informal systems include ethical standards, peer behavior and influence from teachers and students.

The ethical decision-making literature considers ethical culture to be a significant component in decision-making processes (Trevino, 1986; Hunt and Vitell, 1986) which include the directions for day-to-day behavior (Cohen, 1993) helping establish what is considered to be legitimate or unacceptable in an organization or institution (Trevino and Ball, 1992).

The ethical climate as opposed to the ethical culture is viewed as the shared perceptions of what behavior is acceptable and of how ethical issues should be handled in the organization (Victor and Cullen, 1993). The ethical climate is described by Kohlberg (1969) as having three levels of moral judgment and sphere of analysis, which can be individual, local or international. According to Victor and Cullen (1993), the ethical climate reflects the criteria individuals use in ethical decision making, which in this context is “acknowledging the use of other people’s words and ideas”. Given that the students studied in institutional climates in which the use of other people’s words or ideas was not identified as a significant ethical issue, it becomes a great challenge to adapt when they move on to other institutions where the ethical climate was different and which had various ways of preventing, detecting, mitigating and penalizing instances of plagiarism.

The Nigeria National Policy on Education (2004: Section 1 Sub-Section 5) states that Nigeria’s philosophy of education is based on the development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen. It further emphasises the full integration of the individual into the community, with the primary goal of producing a well-rounded individual. However, there have been regularly occurring comments on the lack of implementation of this policy, resulting to a negative impact on the standard of tertiary education in Nigeria.

Recently, there has been a growing awareness of plagiarism and its negative consequences in Nigeria evidenced through incidents that have increasingly exposed plagiarism as a form of behaviour that should no longer be allowed to thrive in the Nigerian educational institutions. These public comments are an attempt to re-shape the “*organizational culture*” of the universities from the outside.

Describing the level of educational awareness of Nigerian students, Arenyeka (2012) stated that a second year student in a British university can write an essay which a fourth year student in a Nigerian university will download believing that since it was placed on the internet, it is of an academically acceptable standard. He went on to state that as lecturers they have issues with students plagiarizing, as it is theft of other people’s original work and such theft is not acceptable. This portrays his views about the level of achievement of of students studying in the Nigerian university as opposed to one studying in the British university.

On the aspect of penalizing plagiarism offenders, Nnabugwu (2012) reported that the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), in conjunction with the National Universities Commission (NUC) are set to focus on academic related corrupt practices such as collective plagiarism by students and staff of Nigerian universities. There have been several cases of such including the recent dismissal of four lecturers on grounds of plagiarism at the University of Calabar (Kalu, 2013).

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.773	13	.773	9	.836	22

Figure 1. Reliability Statistics

Another case was the instance as reported by Chiedozi (2012) who stated that a United States-based Nigerian lecturer has sued the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Dr. Lamido Sanusi, for allegedly plagiarizing his works. There are several such reported cases and accusations which seemingly depict the negative consequences of institutional systems that may not be properly addressing the issue of plagiarism and appropriate acknowledgement of sources at the fundamental level of learning.

On the way the views of the Nigerian society are changing towards plagiarism, NEWS of the PEOPLE (2013) narrated that the Government of Ogun State was accused of lacking morality because the reputation of the invited speaker (former Irish Prime Minister Bertie Harn) who was accused of plagiarism in the past, was not considered.

These cases suggest that acts of plagiarism in Nigeria can no longer be swept under the carpet as was the norm in the past; however, the universities still remain the foundation for the inculcation of exemplary conduct in students for relevant research addressing the needs of the society.

Method

For this study, a mixed method approach was adopted; Nigerian postgraduate students studying in the Engineering faculty of a United Kingdom University participated in the data collection process. The qualitative approach involved the collection of data from 25 semi-structured interview sessions, which were analyzed with Atlas.ti (Ver. 6.2). The quantitative data was collected from 171 participants who completed the IPPHEAE student questionnaires. The study was an aspect of a larger one carried out on student plagiarism in Nigerian universities. As a result of the affiliation of that study to the IPPHEAE project, the IPPHEAE student questionnaire was used for the data collection and the aspect that relates to this study was analyzed for this paper.

in the questionnaire, there were two sets of questions for the “institutional interventions in place” and the “plagiarism policy, guidelines and procedures”. These had 9 and 13 sub-questions respectively. Results of the test for reliability: *Cronbach's* alphas for the 9 questions on “institutional interventions in place” and 13 questions on “plagiarism policy, guidelines and procedures” were .77 and .77 respectively (figure 1). A combination of both questions was found to be highly *reliable* with an alpha of 0.836. (22 items; $\alpha = .836$).

Findings

The results were mixed and comprised both qualitative and quantitative findings. The questions were about students' experience in their previous academic background; the difficulties they faced with “academic writing”; their views on what procedures their

previous institutions had in place to combat student plagiarism and their views on the occurrence of student self-declared plagiarism (PlagOccur). The data was analyzed to check the correlation between the occurrence of plagiarism and both the “Institutional policies and procedures (InstiPlagPolPro)” and “institutional intervention in place (InstitIntervention)”.

Experience on the previous academic background

From the interview sessions with the participants, it was clear that their previous academic background was quite different from that which they met in the UK university. Practices related to plagiarism were significantly different; simply put, the institutional *Ethical context (climate and culture)* were different in a number of ways. Some academic practices which were acceptable in the Nigerian universities in which they had studied were not acceptable in the UK universities in which they now study. There were also differences in the issue of penalties for plagiarism.

From their comments, it can be seen that while they studied in their Nigerian universities most of the students neither knew nor were concerned about plagiarism. Either because they were not taught, it was not detected in their writing or that they were not penalized. Furthermore, they seemed to think that plagiarism was all about referencing. This is reflected in the comment below:

“During my undergraduate days I never really bothered myself with the issue of plagiarism. In-text citation and referencing of authors was most rarely practised and whenever I cited or referenced, I did so without following any referencing standards (like CU-Harvard, Harvard, Oxford etc)... I did not even know these standards existed until I began my program at AAA Uni...”

A broad overview of their previous background was summarized under the themes: teaching, learning, assessment, academic writing, research, study and ICT skills (figure 2).

Difficulties faced with “Academic Writing”

Results from the interviews suggest that Nigerian post-graduates’ previous experience with writing in an academic manner is not in line with western conventions. Data from the sessions with the students, suggests that a number of them were not taught about the concept of plagiarism in the Nigerian universities they came from. One of the participants referred to his experience in the UK university he now studied as a “progressive journey backwards”, explaining that these are the concepts he should have learnt earlier and build up over time. He expressed himself as follows:

“... professional academic writing till date has been a “progressive journey backwards”. I use these words to summarise my experience as the experience started only when I was writing my undergraduate dissertation back in Nigeria and then continued while studying for my masters’ degree in AAA University.”
“... Its a journey backwards because it’s an experience that takes me back to the fundamentals of academic writing which I would have learned much earlier in my educational background. It is an issue today because it wasn’t inculcated as a culture early enough.”

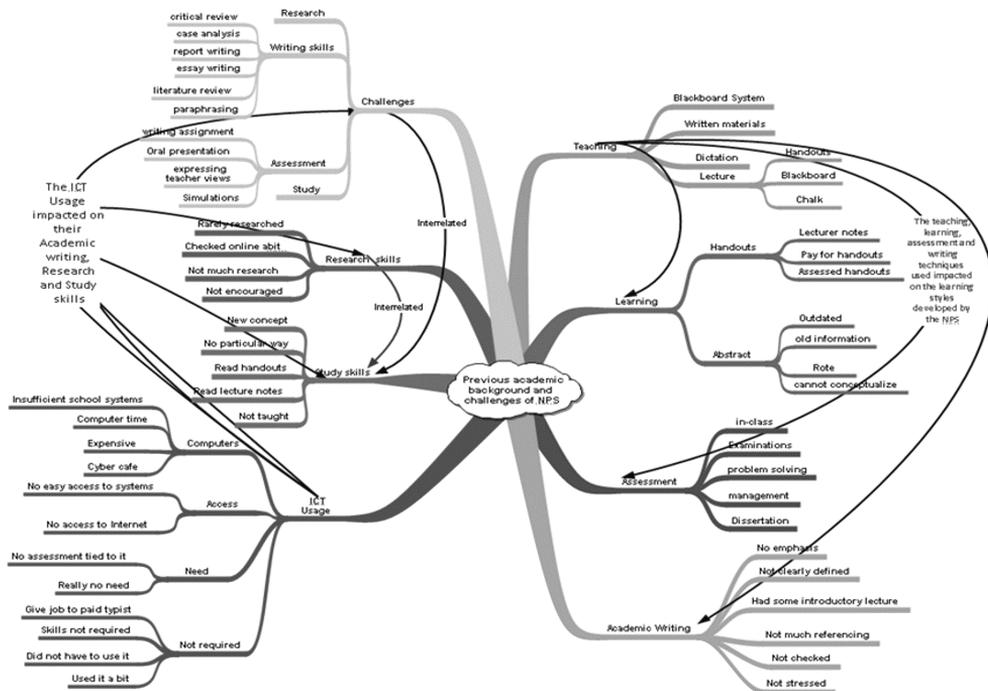


Figure 2. Previous academic background of Nigerian Postgraduate Students

In line with these qualitative findings, the questionnaire investigated what Academic Writing Difficulties (AWD) the participants had. It listed skills such as: 1) Finding good quality sources (AWD_1); 2) Referencing and citation (AWD_2); 3) Paraphrasing (AWD_3) and 4) Understanding different referencing formats and styles (AWD_4).

From the 171 participants who filled out the questionnaires, the result suggests that most of the participants had difficulties with all four skills. From Figure 3, the percentage that admitted to having difficulties with the four skills is higher than half of the sample (67%; 56%; 55% and 58% respectively). This is in line with the qualitative findings.

What their institutions had in place to combat student plagiarism

The results from the survey on the students' views on NHE Institutional intervention represent answers to questions on the presence of institutional intervention or penalties and the ratings are from agreeing strongly that there are no interventions in place to mitigate student plagiarism, to agreeing strongly otherwise. The penalties in question ranged from verbal warning to expulsion from the institution of study. From figure 4 it is shown that most students felt that their previous institutions in Nigeria had few of these penalties. This is seen in the “over 50%” disagree rate for 9 out of the 13 options (69%).

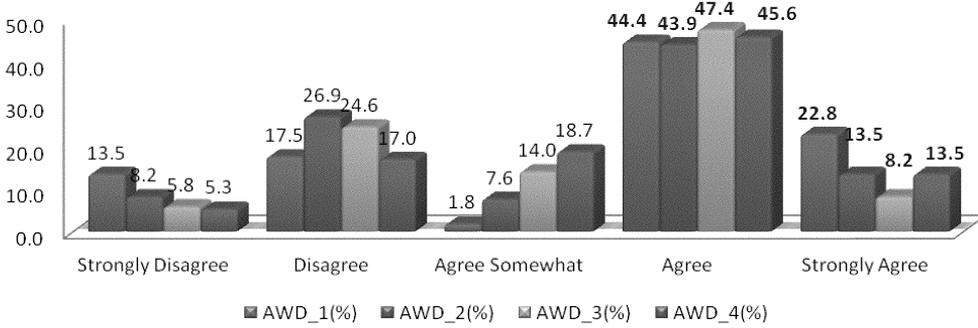


Figure 3. Academic Writing Difficulties (AWD) encountered by NPS

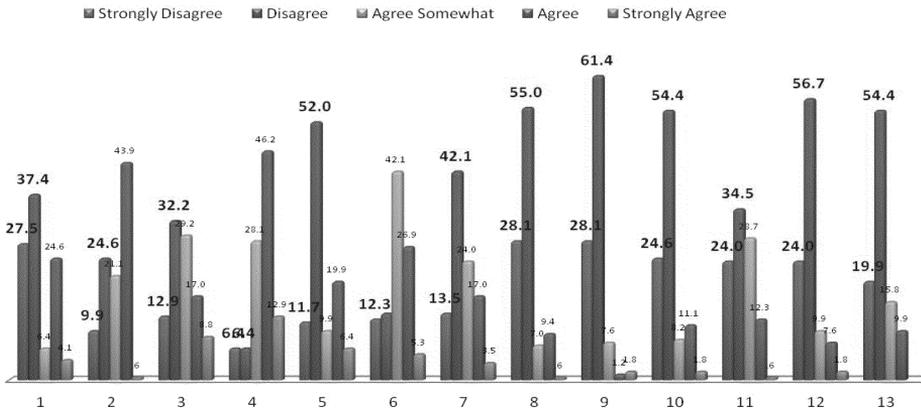


Figure 4. Student views on NHE Institutional intervention

From figure 5, 66% of the students said that they were not aware of any policies in the Nigerian universities they studied. The result also shows that though most of them said they were unaware of these policies and guidelines (figure 5), they still suggest that some form of action will be taken as 64% disagree with the views that “no action will be taken” (figure 6). This raises the question of “what action should be taken?” and “at what level should this action be taken?”

The impact of the institutional plagiarism policies, procedures and guideline on student declared plagiarism

Based on the responses of the students to their previous engagement in plagiarism and the data on the presence of policies, procedures and types of penalties in place, there was a need to know if what is in place is effective.

The impact of the “Institutional Plagiarism Policy and Procedure” (measured by *InstiPlagPolPro*) and “Institution Intervention” (measured by *InstitIntervention*) on

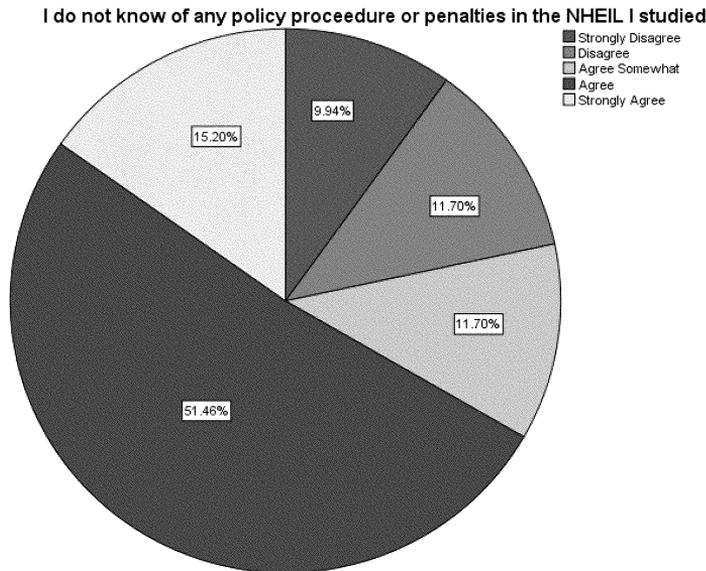


Figure 5. Student views on Nigerian universities policies, procedures and guidelines in place

“occurrence of student self-declared plagiarism” (as measured by *PlagOccur*) was investigated using Spearman’s rho correlation coefficient.

The results for each of the spearman’s correlation analysis are presented in figure 7 and 8.

From the findings, there was little correlation between the two variables and the occurrence of plagiarism. This implied little or no impact of the formal systems in place in the Nigerian universities.

Discussion

A look at a typical Nigerian Higher institution from which these Nigerian postgraduate students came reveals that the pedagogy is quite different from that of the UK universities. In the UK, it is expected that at higher institution level students will be able to take ownership of their learning, while it is apparent from the data that in a number of the Nigerian universities, an approach based on the “conduit” model (Reddy, 1979) of teaching and learning is still commonplace.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the student’s previous academic experience created learning gaps which they had to fill to be able to adapt to studying in UK. Students had issues with basic study skills such as note taking, typing, use of ICT, VLEs, summarizing, paraphrasing, research, referencing styles and sourcing for academic journals.

The data suggests further that the mode of assessment in their Nigerian universities was largely by exams (80%) and there was no real need for substantial development of academic writing until students arrive at the end of their study, at which point, there is a

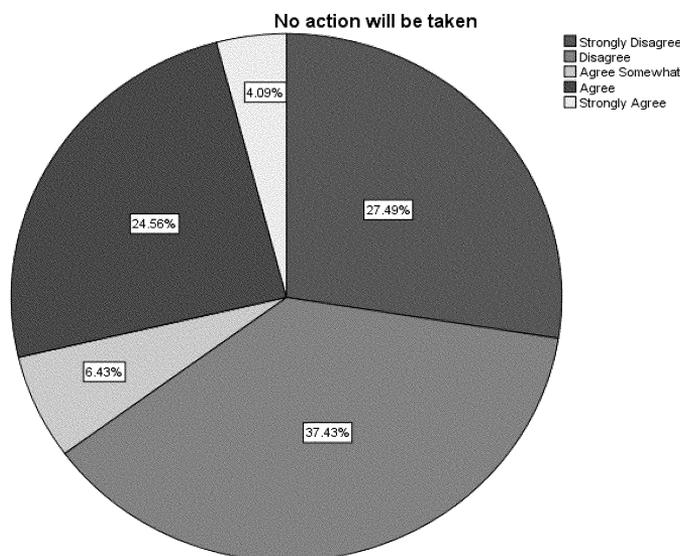


Figure 6. Student views on penalties

dilemma. The students are faced with the probability of getting supervised by lecturers who would not go the extra mile of checking appropriate writing styles or lecturers who have studied outside the country and would check that the written piece of work is up to an acceptable standard.

A few comments from the students suggested that they are not aware of institutional policies in place or being enforced to ensure that the students get fair and consistent assessment in every course in the universities they studied in Nigeria.

When the dissertation is submitted at the end of their study, they are turned in via hardcopies in most cases. With the student-teacher ratios worsening in virtually all disciplines (Oni, 1996, quoting Yesufu, 1996), it becomes a challenge for a teacher to consistently go through each submission in detail and detect instances of plagiarism as there are no digital means of detecting instances of plagiarism.

On arrival, UK universities expect students to start studying immediately with total commitment while some students missed the induction due to the lateness in securing visas and found that they had no options but to learn the basics on their own. The initial shock to most of them was the seeming expectation they perceived from the UK University in which they were studying that every Masters student can make sufficient use of computers for the purpose of studying. During the course of attending the first module/course, they are faced with coursework deadlines. These pieces of coursework were required to be keyed into the system and submitted on-line through Turnitin, the on-line system that searches assignments for similarities to other texts.

Many of these procedures are seemingly new: having to key in the piece of coursework on their own as opposed to “paying typists’ in a business center” in Nigeria; “online soft copy submission . . .” as opposed to “hard copy submissions” that are hard

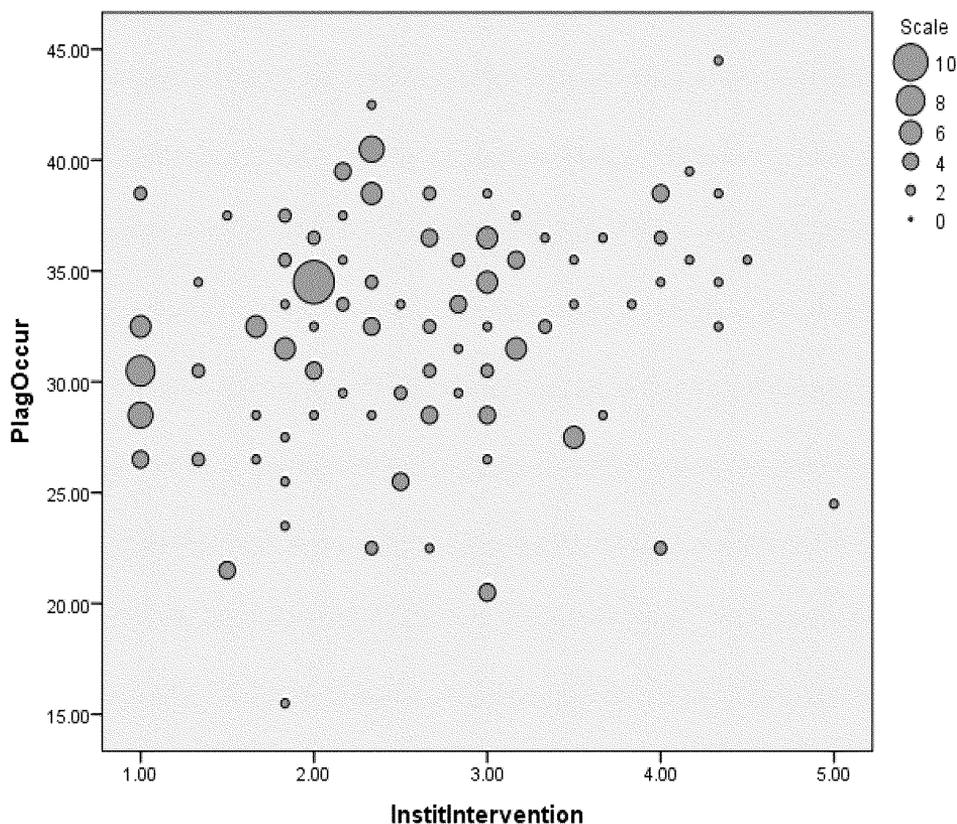


Figure 7. Institution Intervention vs. Student Plagiarism

to verify by the lecturers where the institutions have average student to teacher ratios of approximately 100 : 1 in a number of cases (Udotong, 2012).

The students stated that the most challenging of their problems in adapting in their new study environment was the use of Turnitin. In line with this reasoning, one of the students said that the “knowledge of Turnitin is the beginning of wisdom”. Quite a number of the students expressed “fear” as they understood what “plagiarism” meant, and the system in place to detect it and the penalties that are attached to it in the UK universities.

Some complained bitterly about the “way of writing” and not being able to “...do it as they have been doing it...” They felt they had to learn to write academically and develop the skills (summarizing, paraphrasing, and in-text citation, referencing e.t.c) that UK universities expect them to have mastered at this stage of their learning.

With the “teacher-centered” approach to lecturing in most of the Nigerian universities, the possible lack of student engagement, the possibility that deep-learning has failed to take place, and with the advent of Internet, a cluster of factors allow students

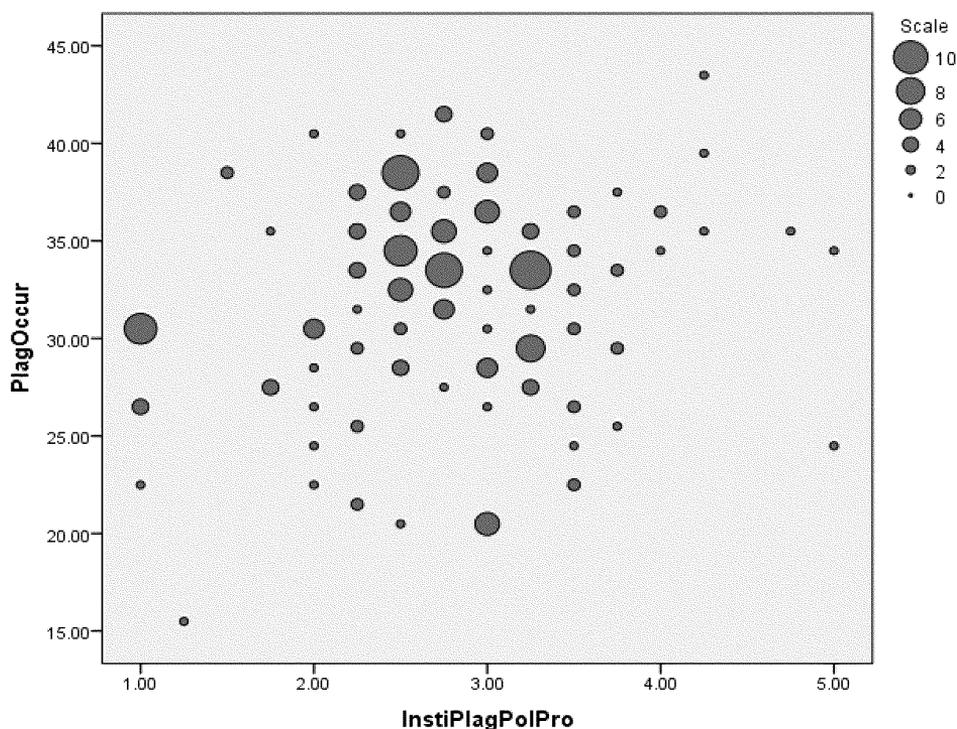


Figure 8. Institutional Plagiarism Policy and Procedure vs. Student Plagiarism

to cut and paste, download and reproduce another person's work without concern, as there are no effective systems in place to detect and penalize them.

For this reason, examination misconducts, falsification of records, academic dishonesty remains one of the major challenges of the Nigerian education system (Olasehinde, 2000; Olasehinde-Williams, Abdullahi & Owolabi, 2003). Their understanding of the UK university study requirement was a combination of skills acquisition, knowledge acquisition, all of which must be demonstrated in their assessments. This requirement in their opinion was enormous and a daunting.

In addition, the presence of an institutional system for the mitigation of student plagiarism, students had to learn to adapt to diverse teaching, learning and assessment styles within the timeframe of coursework deadlines.

Another identified aspect of their challenge they stated was the UK teachers' unfamiliar accent; the method of lecture delivery and the use of virtual learning environments such as Moodle. They found these different from the use of blackboards and the teacher-talking-at-student lecture delivery method which was prevalent in use in their previous Nigerian universities.

Furthermore, they had to learn to research beyond the reading list, which they found to be a challenge because in the past, the material that the teacher presented in class

would have sufficed to make a good grade on the course in their previous Nigerian university.

Some also stated that they also found the effective use of the UK university library a challenge as the Nigerian universities they came from did not have well-equipped libraries; hence they were not used to rigorous search for relevant articles in the library or online.

They had to learn to identify the right materials to use for their research and how to get them. As they progressed in their study in UK, they encountered several learning concepts that they found to be quite different from those they have been exposed to during their past study in Nigeria.

In a bid to learn and perfect the skills of proper academic writing, while trying to get better with their use of the IT Systems, they struggled to cope with these challenges. Some claim that their performance is not usually what they would have had if their previous academic background had been more similar to that which they encountered in the UK.

This impacted on the learning experience of a number of them. Coming from a system where the "result" matters so much, a few of them, speaking retrospectively said that, though they were happy about the exposure and what they learnt, as it was quite different from what they had expected, they may not have paid the amount of money they had paid to come to study as they were not too encouraged by the final results they had.

Recommendations

These recommendations are made with respect to the Nigerian universities and the UK universities. It is recommended in the Nigerian universities that:

- The Nigerian Government through the Federal Ministry of Education should come out with a policy statement on plagiarism and possible penalties. They should have in place guidelines and procedures for their effective mitigation.
- The institutional management staff should ensure that these guidelines and procedures will be used as a consistent way of intervening in the occurrence of student plagiarism.
- Key people should be identified and trained in each department to handle the issues of plagiarism. These should then ensure that others understand what the concept is and be able to manage issues around the occurrence of plagiarism by students.
- Teachers as role model should show good examples worthy of imitation by students and discourage plagiarism in assignments, tests and theses.
- Students should be given handbooks, orientation and re-orientation on the importance of their educational pursuits and on best practices in the use of the Internet, to forestall possible infringement on people's intellectual property.
- The institutions should take up the challenge of preparing the students adequately so they are ready to study anywhere with the appropriate skills.

- Where the Nigerian universities have a course in the first or second year that deals with technical writing, the skills acquired should be re-enforced over their study period.

It is recommended in the UK universities that:

- There should be no assumptions that students coming over to study in the UK universities have the required skills to manage their postgraduate studies effectively without any assistance.
- Since international students may come from a “rote” system, it is good practice to have seminars/tutorials in addition to lectures to clarify the expectations of the new academic context.
- There should be centers for academic writing where support can be provided to the students while they study.

Conclusion

For many reasons, including the lack of an institutional context in Nigeria in which plagiarism is proscribed and effectively punished, as well as other institutional factors such as large, impersonal classes and limited resources, some students in Nigeria succeed by cheating. Students are more engaged with their mobile phones, computers (where the Internet is available), social applications (twitter, Face book, Whatsapp, BBM) than to their academic work. This could be a possible explanation why the student plagiarism culture impacts on their experience when they study elsewhere.

Nigerian universities must create awareness, teach the students the “rules of the game” (Leask, 2006:191) and sustain it over their period of study through an “iterative process” (Ellery, 2008: 507).

The universities will need to *institute* and communicate their policies not only on students and scholars who commit the offense of plagiarism but on the educational environment as a whole.

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