



PLAGIARISM IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH: CAUSES, SYMPTOMS, CONSEQUENCES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

Plagiarism, a negative learning-seeking-behaviour has affected development of research and progress of education globally. In order to reposition research and by extension the educational system, the war against plagiarism must be scaled up. It is in the light of the foregoing that this paper explores the causes, symptoms, consequences and the cures of plagiarism. In order to achieve the preceding objectives, the paper utilized data from secondary sources. The causes of plagiarism identified and discussed in the paper include insufficient reading comprehension, laziness on the part of the author, lack of punitive measures for the offenders and the culture of taking entire paragraph from other papers only to mention the reference at the end (misbelieve). The paper identified absence of quotation signals, lack of reference to source, degree of text transformation among others as symptoms of plagiarism. Regarding the consequences, the paper identified poor quality graduates, legal repercussion, damage to the reputation and career of the author among others. The paper recommends inter alia training and retraining for writers, stringent punishment like dismissal from work for the offenders especially when plagiarism is intentionally committed, imbibing culture of academic honesty and utilization of the anti-plagiarism software.

Keywords: Plagiarism, Academic, Research, Symptoms, Consequences.

Introduction

Plagiarism has become a global academic misbehaviour for quite sometimes now. The situation has deteriorated to the extent that both lecturers and the students are grossly involved in the illicit activity (Yakovchuk, 2007, Uloma and Ikonne, 2013, Ali, Mahmoud, and Suleiman (2014). There is no doubt that giants of today were built on the shoulders of the giants of yesterday. However, adequate acknowledgement is a requirement as much as today's giants build on the foot step of their predecessor. Impliedly, ethics and morality demands that borrowed ideas from the original sources be appropriately acknowledged. Conversely, the reverse has been the case among authors in academic field and even in the larger society globally. The misbehaviour has been aggravated by the unhindered accessibility to information on internet which makes it possible with ease for academic researchers to steal ideas of others without proper acknowledgement (Uloma and Ikonne,

2013). The major trend now is a situation where scholars mimic other writers through popular negative-learning-seeking behaviour tagged “copy and paste” as they conduct academic research. The consequence of the fake behaviour among academics has not only produced incompetent and counterfeit intellectuals, but has succeeded in eroding the integrity of our academic institutions where learning, creativity and innovation are slaughtered at the altar of plagiarism.

The extended effect is that plagiarism constitutes the greatest hurdle to educational development Ezeoha and Ikelechi (n:d). The debilitating consequences of the academic sin, called plagiarism, especially to Nigerian universities system prompted the Committee of Vice-Chancellors of Nigerian Universities (CVNU) to introduced plagiarism checker to eradicate the “copy cat” behaviour among scholars (Centre for Academic Integrity Research and Anti-Plagiarism (n:d), Uloma and Ikonne, 2013). The introduction of the checker itself is a means to an end, not the end in itself. That is to say that despite its introduction, many people will still indulge in the very act. It may persist because some people commit the error of plagiarism ignorantly, while others do it deliberately. Whatsoever the intent behind the crime, the dishonest behaviour may persevere until the causes, symptoms and especially, the consequences and the cures of the hydra-headed problem of plagiarism are known to them.

The above corroborates the view of Pennycock (1996) who argued that plagiarism cannot be viewed as a simple issue whose prevention can be achieved via threats, warnings, and admonitions; but advocated a need for a subtle appreciation of the relationships between different approaches to the use of texts. According to Park (2003) if the researchers do not know what plagiarism is, they cannot know if they have plagiarised. Therefore, this study becomes more necessary to throw more light on the causes, symptoms, consequences and the cure of plagiarism, especially now that the authorities of Nigerian Universities have deemed it fit to get rid of plagiarism from our educational system.

Material and Method

To realize the foregoing objective, the methodology employed both descriptive and analytical methods. This approach relied on a considerable volume of related literature. The review of related literature provided a wide range of scholarly understanding on the subject matter of study. The analysis that followed was undertaken in the light of findings generated from these theoretical excursions. To this end, the article uses literature review to identify causes, symptoms, consequences and measures for re-engineering learning behaviour that will reduce plagiarism in Nigeria.

Conceptual Review

It is worthwhile to know what constitute a good research in order to have a firm grasp of what plagiarism is all about. Several scholars (Rajasekar, Philominathan and Chinnathambi 2013, Isa, 2005, Obasi, 2000) defined research in several ways. For Rajasekar et al (2013), research is an investigation to find solutions to scientific and social problems through objective and systematic analysis. Three important features emerged from this definition. These issues are: research is a quest to provide solutions to a problem, and in the attempt to provide solution to the problem, it must be objectively and systematically carried out. This definition implies that the existence of a problem called for research. In the course of providing solutions to the problem, the research must be carried out without bias (objectivity). More so, it must be procedurally done and not in a

haphazard manner. This definition connects easily to the subject matter under study because a research that is plagiarism-free must command some elements of originality. Originality as an essential element of a research may not feature in a research undertaking if research problem of the study is lacking, as well as when a research is not objectively carried out.

It is also defined as a systematic and objective search for new knowledge of the subject of study and/or application of knowledge to the solution of a novel problem (Isa, 2005). From this definition also, research must be characterised with new knowledge. This implies that research is beyond direct stealing of people's idea or text which is plagiarism, but the creation of new knowledge or the application of the existing knowledge to solve societal problems. Obasi (2000) did not mince words when he defined research as an intensive and ordered study of a subject aimed at learning new facts and testing of scientific propositions and ideas. The unique characteristic of this definition is that it lays emphasis on research as an intensive exercise. A research ought not to be hastily carried out. If it is done that way, the tendency to spend quality time and other resources to carry out a detailed study may be lost. Where this become the case, the research will be rashly carried out resulting in direct lifting or 'cut and paste' and other unethical writing practices which may constitute plagiarism. In the nutshell therefore, a sound research devoid of plagiarism ought to be original or new, systematically carried out, and among other factors, it should manifest some aura of objectivity. When a research possessed the above qualities among others, then the writer has escaped the trap or danger of plagiarism. With this prelude it becomes easier to understand what constitutes plagiarism.

The above exposition introduces us to having ideas regarding what plagiarism could be like. But the above alone is not sufficient to provide comprehensively what plagiarism is all about. Hence, it becomes necessary to discuss the concept of plagiarism itself. The word plagiarism comes from the Latin word *Plagium*, which literally means theft or kidnapping. It originally refers to kidnapping a child or a slave. In the seventeenth century, it emerged in the meaning of literary theft, that is, appropriation of literary texts (Mallon, 1989).

The meaning of plagiarism according to Merriam-Webster online Dictionary is in tandem with the preceding brief historical analysis. The Dictionary refers to plagiarism as the act of stealing and passing off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own, using (another's production) without crediting the source. In the same vein, Orim (2014) defines plagiarism as the submission of someone else's work as your own for academic credit [or financial gain without acknowledging the source]. What can be inferred from the above definitions is that plagiarism could be said to have occurred when someone's ideas documented are utilized without acknowledging the owner. In other words, the crime of plagiarism can be said to have been effectively committed when ideas, text, language etc of the original writer are stolen for the plunder's interest without crediting the source.

There are divergent views regarding the stolen ideas or texts not acknowledged or unacceptably acknowledged. The first view states that plagiarism most a times is intentionally committed. This means that the crime of plagiarism is committed by design. It is a choice made by the perpetrator and not a mistake. A clear definition on intent was given by Writing Programme Administrator WPA, in (Orim, 2014). It qualified plagiarism to have occurred when a writer deliberately uses the language, ideas or other original material of another author without acknowledging the sources.

The second view holds that plagiarism is mostly committed unintentionally. The definition of plagiarism (Orim, 2014) corroborates this view. It maintains that plagiarism is the use ‘without giving reasonable and appropriate credit to or acknowledging the author or source, of another person's original work, whether such work is made up of code, formulas, ideas, language, research, strategies, writing or other form(s)’. This view appropriates plagiarism as an unintentional act because the author who commits the crime of plagiarism must have acknowledged sources but not reasonably and appropriately done. The probable reason for plagiarism to have been committed by authors in this category could be attributed to shallow knowledge of how to reference borrowed ideas. Though this might have occurred out of sheer ignorance, but there is no gain-saying that it is not an act of plagiarism. The conclusion is that the use of other person’s ideas whether intentional or unintentional without proper acknowledgement of the source is plagiarism and is capable of attracting the same punishment. The succeeding section detailed the causes of plagiarism whether intentional or unintentional as the case might be.

Analysis of the Causes, Symptoms, Consequence and Way Forward

Causes: Several reasons have been advanced regarding the cause of plagiarism. The factors responsible for incidences of plagiarism as discussed below are not peculiar to Nigeria alone but may apply to other parts of the world. One of the prominent causes of plagiarism is insufficient reading comprehension (Howard, 2001). Perhaps this happens due to inability to rephrase ideas, or it could be as a result of being new to the field. Consequently, writers often find it difficult having a distinct voice, rather they merge their voice with that of the source without citing the original source. When they struggle with expressing their understanding in writing in their own words, it normally result to unintentional and inappropriate use of sources as stated by Marsh et al. (1997) who argued that plagiarism could be unintentional and due to defective cognitive processing. For Schmitt (2005:65) plagiarism in this form occurs unintentionally as a result of ‘fewer language resources’. Rabab, Omar, Dalia, Hamdi, Ahmed and Abdulkader (2015) called it “immature writing skills”. For him, scientific writing is a language that undergoes development over time, and the most important tool to gain this skill is excessive reading of literature and practice of scientific writing. The bottom line in this case is that most writers commit the error of plagiarism due poor understanding of the text they have read. Because the rate of comprehension is low, the ability to transmit what was read in their own language becomes very difficult. Ignorantly therefore, such writer would have no any other choice than to resort to direct lifting of ideas created by others which normally culminate in plagiarism.

Another fundamental factor is the weakness on the part of the institutions or individuals to punish the culprits. Ali, Mahmoud, and Suleiman (2014) did not mince words when they argued that “even though submission of work without reference constitutes a serious academic writing deficit that should be penalized by teachers. Many a time, students go unpunished, thus justifying teacher’s contribution to the increase in this academic misconduct.” Teachers most cases encourage plagiarism because they are weak to assess properly student’s assignments, projects and term papers with respect to proper referencing of their work and punish defaulters accordingly. This negative attitude of the teachers creates the impression on the part of the students that they are on course or that a work not properly cited and referenced do not have serious consequences in research endeavours. This eventually becomes a habit. The consequence is that the poorly bred students would suddenly become a teacher and a vicious circle of plagiarists is formed as the same student who turned teacher would produce the same product as himself or herself. Institutions are

not helping matters as well. Issues that borders on plagiarism should not be treated with levity. Most scholars who are caught and reported to institutions are treated on a lighter mood. They are either demoted (as in the case of two lecturers from Chemistry Department of University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, demoted from Lecturer I to Lecturer II (Adediji, 2013)), denied to enjoy promotion for some period of times or the case deliberately waved aside by the authority of the institution. These measures are not adequate to eradicate plagiarism but rather encourage it. The best option that could deter others would have been outright dismissal.

Yet another factor is laziness on the part of some scholars. Many scholars in have the ambition of publishing quite a good number of works, but these same scholars lack the ambitions and energy to face the rigors inherent in producing quality academic works. This forced some scholars into what Ezeoha and Ikelechi (n:d) called self-plagiarism. Kizza in Ezeoha and Ikelechi (n: d) argued that self plagiarism occurs when an author re-uses portions of his or her previous published work in subsequent works. This deliberate act to recycle portion(s) of works already done is partly caused by laziness and hasty attitude to publish more works. Another related factor to the aforementioned driving people crazy into the incidence of plagiarism is attributed to the popular maxim “publish or perish” among the academics. It is either that one publishes and get promoted to the next level or refuse to publish and remain at same level and perish with frustration including other psychological problems along the line. The argument of Yusuf (2012) substantiates this fact. He maintained that many academics have been plunged into a career-long survival race for promotions and positions within their institutional hierarchies and perhaps beyond. For an academic to survive in such a race, they must obtain desperately needed publications to their credit through research. Unarguably, publishing is an integral part of a prestigious academic career. To lose the ability to publish most likely means the end of an academic position. Publishing genuine academic paper in itself is not an offence, but the hasty approach to meet up with the number of the required publications for promotion or the inordinate ambition to be recognised as the most published in the faculty always lands scholars in into the act of plagiarism through “copy and paste” or outright removal of the original author’s name and substituting with theirs. The view of Rahab and others captured below vividly summarises this position:

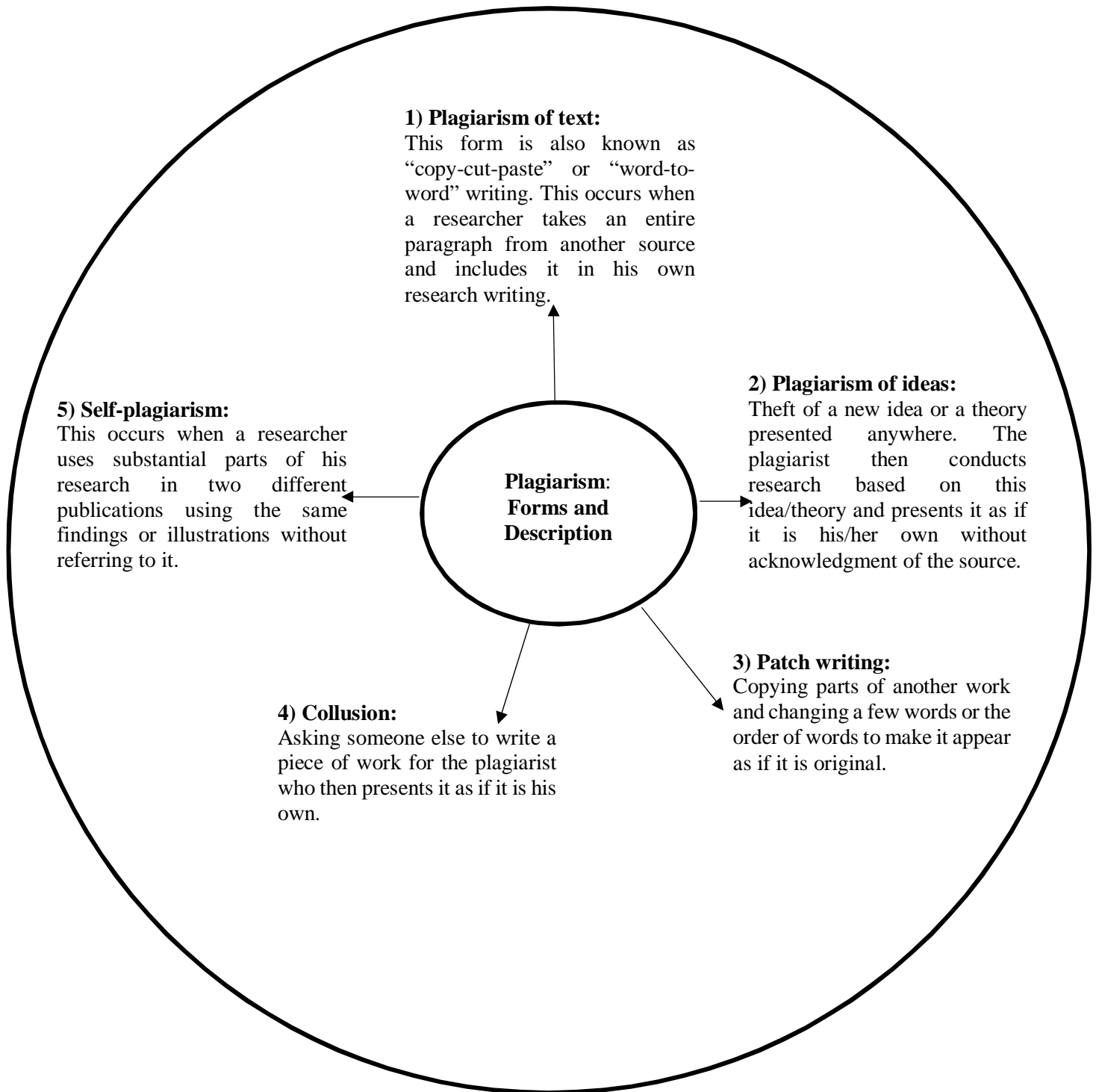
In recent years, research has become a growing industry. There is fierce competition among more than 7.1 million researchers in the world to have their research published in over 25,000 journals. Researchers are under pressure to get their work published in good journals. When this pressure is coupled with lack of time, research skills and ease of obtaining information and articles from the internet, the rate of plagiarism increases. (Rahab, 2015:2).

One more factor responsible for plagiarism among scholars is what Rabab (2015) termed misbelieve. This according to him occurs as many researchers believe that taking entire paragraphs from different papers and including them in their writing is accepted as long as they mention the references at the end. The result will be a new article having substantial parts in the “copy-cut-paste” style, which is the definition of plagiarism.

Symptoms: Plagiarism no doubt is a complex phenomenon to identify, however, several researchers have identified different types of plagiarism and a few (Yakovchuk 2007, WPA 2008) are presented for illustration. Its identification is usually known practically through the forms or

the symptoms it manifests. Its symptoms based on a framework for identifying plagiarism by (Yakovchuk, 2007) could be absence of quotation signal, absence of a reference to a source and a degree of text transformation. These symptoms or forms of plagiarism as identified by the scholar have universal applicability. In most cases, academic writing among scholars defiled the culture of making a reference to a source. This very act may be done intentionally or unintentionally. When intentionally done, then it affirms the definition of plagiarism as given by Writing Programme Administrators (WPA, 2008), where plagiarism was defined to have occurred when a writer deliberately uses the language, ideas or other original material of another without acknowledging the sources. This represents a clear motive to disguise somebody else's work as one's own. It may also be unintentionally done when a writer uses the ideas of others and not properly referenced. The writer in this case may not have any ulterior motive but may lack the basic of proper referencing conventions. Writers that commit any one of the two mentioned are on the same platform and might be charged on the same offence of plagiarism. A writer who manifests the later symptom will also be charged on the same offence of plagiarism as ignorance is not an excuse in criminal offences.

Yet another symptom of plagiarism among academic writers takes the form of what Yakovchuk (2007) refers to as degree of word transformation. The basic indices under this according to Yakovchuk are: (Exact Copying, EC), Word Close to Original (WCO) and Word Distant from Original (WDO). In Exact Copying the writer reproduce without acknowledging the idea of the original writer either verbatim or direct paraphrase. In Word Close to Original, there is usually a source reference without a quotation signal. This is partly attributed to what Yakovchuk (2007) refers to student's confusion over what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable paraphrase and also language difficulties. A writer who found himself in this kind of situation needs to be guided by a tutor who is more advanced and experienced in writing than him. Word Distant from Original constitutes plagiarism of idea. This symptom is very difficult to diagnose even with the electronic plagiarism detection software being advocated by the Committee of Vice-Chancellor of the Nigeria Universities (CVNU). Other milder symptoms of plagiarism are: inaccuracies of source documentation (e.g. incomplete references to sources, wrong use of quotation marks and inaccuracies in documenting secondary citations. These may not constitute plagiarism on lighter mood, but are poor academic practices that need to be checkmated. The symptoms of plagiarism can be succinctly illustrated using the summary presented by Rahab et al (2015) in the diagram below:



Adapted from Rabab A.A. M, Omar M. S, Dalia G. M. Hamdi N. A, Ahmed M, and Abdulkader A. (2015), Plagiarism in Medical Scientific Research, [Journal of Taibah University Medical Sciences](#) Volume 10, Issue 1, 6–11.

Consequences: The negative consequences of plagiarism applied to teachers, students and even writers outside the academic environment. On the part of the students, Tyson (2010) argue that student plagiarism by-passes learning and produces inadequately trained graduates who are potential threats to the society through lack of competence and skills at various levels. For Marsden et al. (2005), the occurrence of plagiarism among students could tarnish the image of the higher education institutions and increase media scrutiny which could lead to negative publicity and reputational damage. No doubt, plagiarism can affect the reputation and career of the author (s) negatively. These negative consequences can also be extended to the department, university or the institution, or even the country. The negative consequences on the country may become highly pronounced especially if the news is published in a well known internet sources. A good example of this was the case of two lecturers sacked in Federal University of Agriculture Abeokuta and four in the University of Calabar, Cross River state, Nigeria, and published on internet Kayode-Adedeji (2013). The publisher went to the extent of including the names of the culprits, their departments and the universities on the internet. The undesirable consequence is the damage to the personality of the people that were involved, their departments and the universities across the globe. As individuals, the damage caused by the plagiarism is capable of following them for their entire life. It does not end with the sack or dismissal from their present position, but they will surely find it difficult to obtain another respectable job as their names have been ruined, making any kind of meaningful career impossible. For [Das](#) and [Panjabi](#) (2011) the loss of reputation if plagiarism is detected does not affect only the author(s) but also the reviewers, editors, and the journal as a whole. This could affect other journals under the same publication banner. The very essence and public respect for science and its truthfulness is lost in the process.

Plagiarism may also have legal repercussion (<http://www.ithenticate.com>). An author has the right to sue a plagiarist. Some plagiarisms may also be deemed a criminal offense, possibly leading to a prison sentence. Writers must be conscious of copyright laws and ways to avoid plagiarism. As a professional writer, to plagiarize is a serious ethical and perhaps legal issue. The case of two Professors in university of Port Harcourt who indulged in the act of plagiarism is evident. An Associate Professor at the School of Engineering and Technology, National University, Sacramento, United States (Daily Post, 2012) dragged two Professors lecturing at the Department of Economics, University of Port Harcourt, before a Federal High Court, Port Harcourt, Nigeria for allegedly pirating the work of an American-based Nigerian professor titled “Corruption in Nigeria: Understanding and Managing the Challenges.” This article was published in the Nigeria’s Economic Summit Group, NESG, economic indicators. This article was retitled and published as “Corruption and Economic Growth: A Survey of Three Institutions in Nigeria” by the two professors in Journals of Research and National Development, Volume 6, June 2008 without authorisation and acknowledgment of the original author (Daily Post, 2012). To make the legal consequence more severe, Daily Post gathered that the original owner of the work asked the court to order both lecturers to withdraw the papers from the public and remove same from the website of the University of Port Harcourt as well as award him the sum of N27 million as compensation. Apart from the monetary compensation, there is nothing as seriously damaging to a researchers’ reputation as when the word “retract” according to Das and Panjabi (2011) is labelled against their article on the internet. The damaging part of it is that the article is not completely removed from the journal web site or the databases, but the title, the author list and their affiliations remain with the addition of the term “retracted” next to the article title. The consequence according to Das and Panjabi (2011) may go beyond mere retraction to reporting the case to his employers and/or the

professional bodies that the author may be a member of. Further consequence according to the authors could lead to loss of funding for research, loss of professional dignity, and even loss of employment

Plagiarism in an Academic Research: The Way Forward

Just like a popular saying goes that ignorance is not an excuse, it is worthwhile that before one embarked on a serious academic write up, he or she should learn about plagiarism. It is very important to know what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it. The rules are easy to understand and follow.

Scholars should learn to write and abide by academic conventions. By so doing, they are passing through learning stage. Enduring to pass through this phase gradually qualifies them to meet the academic writing requirements by learning self-expression in a language that may not be theirs (Pecorari, 2003:320). This is based on the principle that a novice writer must learn how to crawl before walking, learn how to walk before running and learn how to run before flying. This phase usually results to substantial dependence of the student on the language of their sources and is referred to as patchwriting (Howard, 2001).

Training: Departments, Faculties and the institutions at various levels should conduct regular training for students and teachers on the art and science of writing. This can be easily implemented if a research committee is set up at these levels. It would be the responsibility of the committees to advise the management at each level to organise seminars and workshops to enhance writing skills of their students and teachers. With regular training of this nature, the susceptibility to plagiarism could be reduced to the barest minimum. Apart from the regular training through workshops and seminars, research methodology teachers should endeavour to guide their students and always lay emphasis on the evil of plagiarism to their students and colleagues.

Honesty: a reputable writer is usually guided by the popular slogan which says that ‘honesty is the best policy’ in the course of doing everything in life. Plagiarism as reiterated earlier in the study cannot be exclusively stopped by issuing of threats, warning or the use of plagiarism software detectors. The easiest way without recourse to these measures is when the writer exhibited some level of sincerity in his write up. This heart-probing exercise would no doubt force the writer to do the right thing. The writer should admit from the onset that deceitful write-up mislead himself, the readers and the society at large. The writer should realise that plagiarism is an academic sin against himself, the readers, humanity and above all his God.

Punishment: punishments of different types are recommended for plagiarists. This range from compelling the writer to re-write his work, suspension from some activities for a period of time, demotion in rank and absolute dismissal from work. This study recommends dismissal from work especially when plagiarism was intentionally committed. For instance, where the author is found to have deleted original author’s name and replaced with his or the case of a prolific plagiarist who changes or replaces words in the text to steal original author’s idea and claim it to be his.

Anti-plagiarism: there are various commercial anti-plagiarism outfits like EVE, Turnitin.com that report cases of matching text of web documents. Individuals and institutions should endeavour to

utilize them to detect plagiarism. Search engine like Google can also be used if the financial capacity to utilize the later sources is not available.

Conclusion

Plagiarism as an academic misbehavior has caused lot of damages to individuals and the society at large. The costs of plagiarism to individuals and the general society ranges from poorly trained graduates, legal repercussions to damages caused to the reputations of individuals and institutions in our society. The paper argues that, perhaps a lot of people do not know the causes of it. Some may know causes, but have inadequate knowledge of the symptoms. Perhaps they aware of the symptoms but may not be knowledgeable about the consequences. Probably, they know the consequences, but lack the measures to cure it. It is on this note that the paper discusses extensively the causes, symptoms, consequences and the cures of plagiarism. Having discussed this issue at length, the paper concludes that to avoid the incidence of plagiarism, there must be heart-probing exercise by individual writers, especially among those who commit this academic sin intentionally. It is onus on them to embrace the spirit of academic honesty. For those that commit it unintentionally, they should endeavour to know much about plagiarism before embarking on any serious write up.

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