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Towards a More Enduring Prevention of Scholarly Plagiarism among University Students in Nigeria

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Abstract- The rate at which university students involve in various acts of plagiarism has been a matter of central concern to academics and university management at least over the last decades. The scholarly contributions that the issue has generated particularly are becoming interminable. It is beyond the intention of this paper however to conclude this vast discussion but rather suggest that effective solution to plagiarism among students in the university should not only be hinged on detection-cum-punitive measure alone at the expense of university based prevention programme that helps students develop strong writing skills. This review identified a range of scholarly works that presented evidence on reality of plagiarism and its associated problems in ivory towers particularly in Nigeria. The work primarily focused on addressing plagiarism among university students in Nigeria but, as it has been noted throughout the write-up, achieving effective prevention of plagiarism among students should not be limited to adopting plagiarism software detection alone.

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I. INTRODUCTION

For thousands of years, scholars, philosophers, educators, social surveyors, academics and many others have advanced varied reasons for the establishment of Universities throughout the world. Catalogue of reasons ranging from formation of habit of life that lasts through life, teaching of universal knowledge, creation of prepared mind, to equal opportunity vocationalism, i.e. equipping students with basic knowledge required for employment have been enunciated. However, a more central purpose of a university has been given as creation, preservation and dissemination of knowledge. No doubt, universities all over the world are viewed as institutions that play central role in knowledge economy. In the words of Kenny (1998) "Universities are communities of learners" bound together by the "shared goals of investigation and discovery" and that a central part of mission of a University is to ensure that all staff and all students participate in the mission.

Unfortunately, in a bid to participate in the mission, i.e. research which is regarded as the most important aspect of scholarship in some quarters,

findings from social research have shown that some academic staff and many students in Universities around the globe are far from conducting research according to rules; students and academics are enmeshed in quagmire of various academic dishonesty. As a matter of fact in many higher institutions of learning, overall climate of honesty and ethical behaviour which should characterize a strong learning and teaching community are deemphasized. Instead of academic integrity holding sway, plagiarism, a common form of academic dishonesty has become the order of the day among academics and students.

II. REVIEWING PLAGIARISM

Academic cheating is a timeless ethical offence; it has been in existence since the beginning of institutions of learning (Baird, 1980). Literature is awash with different personalities who had one time or another being guilty of academic cheating. Hannis (2004) traced the beginning of stealing of other people's words to the time of Shakespeare while Radin (1991) brought to fore the case of Dr. Martin Luther King who plagiarized in his undergraduate dissertation without proper citation. Plagiarism, no doubt, is a resiliently growing global academic problem (Bannister, & Thorne, 1997; Anderson, 2001; Fain & Bates, 2002). The phenomenon of students' plagiarism is neither a novel nor recently evolving practice.

Plagiarism is a disease that has for long bestridden academic world like a colossus, but has become worse in recent times with the rapid development of computing and Internet technologies that has made electronic works and texts more accessible to people within a short period of time (Howard, 2000; Weinstein & Dobkin, 2002).

It is documented as a problem in every human academic and educational setting from primary to University levels that requires cross-cutting tasks to address it burgeoning spread. It is a repetition of truism that this variant of academic dishonesty is on the rise; a correspondingly large literature testifies to the recent growth of plagiarism in academia especially in western Universities (Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999; Abdolmohammadi & Baker, 2007).

From all intents and purposes, plagiarism is an ill-wind that does nobody any good. This vexed issue

has reached a worrisome dimension to the extent that a segment of scholars recently claimed that the problem seemed to have defied every known solution in some Universities (Sutherland-Smith; 2010). It is a despicable act that is seen widely as a threat to intellectual property, obstacle to the spread of proper, morally acceptable, qualitative student learning, and a problem whose consequences are unimaginable. Plagiarism has attracted condemnation of phenomenal sum largely because of its inherent limitations on students' learning and opportunity to develop higher level cognitive learning skills (Park, 2003; Granitz & Loewy, 2007; Abdolmohammadi & Baker, 2007).

On a cautionary note at this juncture, defining plagiarism is an exercise that is fraught with complexities. One should not be unware of various definitions of plagiarism that have been given by scholar mainly because the act is value-laden. Achieving or presenting a widely accepted or consensus definition or clarification of plagiarism, or what it entails has courted controversies and setbacks in many Universities. Little wonder, different Universities define plagiarism and its consequences in their regulations so as to forestall misconception and controversy between members of academic staff and students.

As established above, plagiarism is a nebulous concept; but traditionally, it can thus be defined as violation of someone else's intellectual property rights. It is the act of adopting and using ideas, thoughts, writing/texts, figures, data, analyses, argumentations, pictures, techniques, computer programmes and inventions of others as one's without acknowledging or making proper acknowledgment of the source/s of the work. Gibaldi (2003, 66) described plagiarism as a violation of someone else's intellectual property rights, a form of academic theft and a moral and ethical offence. In recent times, plagiarism has reared its ugly head in various dimensions. Activities of plagiarists vary from cut and paste of article/s or texts from the internet without acknowledging the owner, paraphrasing without proper referencing, citation of a text to a false authorship and buying a paper from a research service etc (Evans, Craig & Mietzel, 1991 cited in Anderman, Griesinger & Westerfield, 1998 p. 85).

There is no consensus as regard reasons for involvement of students in the act of plagiarism, but as the following review from University of Alberta's guide to plagiarism will reveal, there is some evidence in literature that act of plagiarism will occur when factors predisposing students to plagiarism are not addressed or met. The available empirical evidence suggests that students are likely to plagiarize when they are in the dark about what plagiarism is all about. They may have heard about the concept but are confused about the meaning of the concept and what makes people to commit the offence. Another common problem is lack of research skills by students. Social research findings have shown

that plagiarism could be avoided if undergraduates and postgraduates are knowledgeable about how to search catalogue, search databases for journal articles and how to cite the ideas and text that are found useful from so many authors.

Closely related to this is the problem of inability of students to critically evaluate internet sources. This is important because of the fact that not all the text or materials on the internet show or display conspicuous information needed for correct and proper citation and this could have negative impact on the writing of such a student. In this case, students will have to do extra work in order to get the source/s of the work or do away with the work completely. Plagiarism could be avoided if all people who write articles and research papers know when and how to cite the ideas and text that they had taken from other authors.

Confusion between plagiarism and paraphrasing among students is another influencing factor of plagiarism. Quite a significant number of students are unaware of the rules guiding paraphrasing. In fact, this is common when students are confronted with paraphrasing paragraphs from unfamiliar subjects or technical jargons. Students fall prey of unintentional plagiarism due to their inability to decipher the thin-line between paraphrasing and plagiarism. Of utmost importance also is the place of poor writing skills of students among the various factors and reasons students plagiarize. It is Imperative that faculty members in related courses in a department should help students develop strong writing skills.

A major review of literature and other comprehensive efforts to summarize current knowledge about common types of plagiarism have led to the following evidence-based conclusions according to the submission of Plagiarism.org. Highlighted below are the 10 most common types of plagiarism as ranked in order of severity of intent.

- Clone - Submitting another's work, word-for-word, as one's own
- CTRL-C - Contains significant portions of text from a single source without alterations
- Find - Replace - Changing key words and phrases but retaining the essential content of the source
- Remix - Paraphrases from multiple sources, made to fit together
- Recycle - Borrows generously from the writer's previous work without citation
- Hybrid - Combines perfectly cited sources with copied passages without citation
- Mash-up - Mixes copied material from multiple sources
- 404 Error - Mixes copied material from multiple sources
- Aggregator - Includes proper citation to sources but the paper contains almost no original work

- Re-tweet - Includes proper citation, but relies too closely on the text's original wording and/or structure

As argued above, absence of a clear-cut single all encompassing definition of plagiarism or seemingly lack of agreement on what constitutes it among scholars has produced two different views of the concept. According to Sowden (2005), plagiarism can best be understood from two paradigms i.e. intentional or unintentional/accidental (Devlin & Gray, 2007). Observations from bookmakers have shown that not all cases of what is regarded as plagiarism are as a result of unethical and intentional behaviour of students. On the other hand, there exists group of students who wittingly present other people's ideas as their own without acknowledging the author of the intellectual property. In fact, the understanding of plagiarism along these divides has to a greater extent determined how plagiarism is defined and what categories of acts are viewed as plagiarism in different Universities. In the same vein, the categorisation has equally helped in no small measure formulation of policy and practice to reduce the act plagiarism.

In the literature, several causation factors of students in plagiarism have been given. Studies such as Bonjean & McGee, 1965; Scanlon & Neumann, 2002; and Bennett, 2005 and many others attributed this problem to demographic, individual and situational factors. These studies explain variance in the involvement of students in plagiarism based on age and sex of perpetrators. According to Lyer and Eastman in 2006, male and younger students have higher propensity to be involved in plagiarism than female and older students. In the same vein, other studies also maintained that students on lower CGPA score are more likely to engage in plagiarism than students with higher CGPAs due to their desire for higher grades (Rettinger & Jordan, 2005).

Also, in the face of investigating factors prompting students' involvement in the act of plagiarism, other studies indicated factors such as linguistic/cultural background of students and unprecedented availability of large amount of materials and texts on the internet which has made the internet a ready-made pool from which students can copy and paste without hindrances (Weinstein & Dobkin, 2002). In the views of Park (2003) and Cohen (2004), inability to express one's ideas appropriately due to lack of language proficiency is an overriding factor behind plagiarism for some university students. In the views of Cameron (2007), producing flawless and appropriate write-ups in second language requires a lot of time and energy for many people; as a result, many students struggle to express themselves at the level of sophistication of which they are capable in their native language. In order to save time and also enhance the quality of their works some students engage in

plagiarism. Also, several other studies underscore factors such as unhealthy competition among students in terms of achievement in class and lackadaisical attitudes of academic to plagiarism (Canning, 1956 and Baird, 1980).

III. THE NIGERIAN CASE

Plagiarism among universities' students is not unique to Nigeria. The country, like many others in Africa has her share of the problem. Regrettably, the emerging general consensus has it that plagiarism among university students in Nigerian has virtually become a norm mainly because only few academics view it as a moral and ethical problem. Happenings and events in recent times have shown that the issue of plagiarism among Undergraduates and Postgraduates has transcended the realm where it was viewed as strictly uncommon occurrence to a worrisome academic problem. Considering the level and the rate of occurrence of plagiarism in Nigerian universities, the act seems to have reached a crescendo in the last one decade.

There is an apparent paradox in the issue of plagiarism among university students in Nigeria. The act has become a seemingly ubiquitous part of students' national culture; but, obviously and unfortunately in the 21st century, there still exists dearth of reliable empirical studies in the area of plagiarism among University students. However, a growing body of evidence about activities of students in some Nigerian Universities shows that a significant number of undergraduates and postgraduates plagiarize in their assignments and theses. Adebayo (2011) and Babalola (2012) in their studies report that reasonable number of Nigerian students participate in various forms of plagiarism such as soliciting term papers from paper mills, duplicating colleague's assignment with and without the knowledge of the owner of the work to outright copying from journals and textbooks without proper referencing etc.

There is a total consonance of views on involvement of Nigerian students in universities abroad. Orim et. al. (2012) in their findings from a study conducted in a UK University revealed that Nigerian postgraduate students abroad are not exempted from plagiarism. This study revealed that plagiarism among Nigerian postgraduates overseas is a serious problem. It further showed that most of the respondents in the study had little or no knowledge of plagiarism prior their trip to UK. Other reasons offered for participation of Nigerian students in this widely recognized unethical lapse are inadequate knowledge of students about appropriate citing and referencing of scholarly works, and the fact that reasonable number of academics directly or indirectly tolerates plagiarism due to their decrease surveillance.

IV. ADDRESSING PLAGIARISM IN NIGERIA'S IVORY TOWERS

Students Plagiarism no doubt is a very serious form of ethical misconduct in Nigerian universities. For this reason, various official steps have been taken in recent times to address it in all scholarly disciplines. A sufficient case is that of Committee of Vice Chancellors (CVC) of Nigerian universities that recently partnered with a UK Information Technology firm, for the deployment of plagiarism detection software (Turnitin) in all federal Universities to counteract plagiarism among students (Enekano, 2013).

Meanwhile, approval and adoption of plagiarism detecting software such as Turnitin, copycatch, Eve2, Plagium, Seesources, PlagiarismDetect, or, Plagiarism Checker, and EssayRater etc in Nigerian Universities are commendable steps. Of all the several detection software in existence, Turnitin has received the blessings of CVC in Nigeria. For the benefit of lay people, Turnitin is a software detection service that can assist faculty in the identification of incidences of plagiarism. The software has a database that accommodates more than 10 million students' papers worldwide. Turnitin like many other plagiarism detection systems works by selecting string (number of words or characters) of a particular length from a source document and compare relationship between the strings with that of a target documents (Gillam, Marinuzzi, and Ioannou, 2011).

Adopting plagiarism detection software in Nigerian universities incontrovertibly relays an important message; i.e. dealing with problems confronting intellectual property by catching plagiarists via the use of Turnitin. As a matter of fact, the idea sounds not only reasonable but plausible, but it might not sufficiently tackle the issue of plagiarism and its associated problem in Nigerian universities. This is so because of evidences from some Universities around the globe where Turnitin has been put to test have shown that the software has its many dark sides and minuses, which have consequently made the software, to a considerable extent, inadequate for the use to which CVC have put it. In the words of Joyce (2003), application of the software (Turnitin) has several problems. The software can only discover certain published and unpublished works on the internet while the so-called works under invisible web (papers available on the internet via subscribed databases) and loose paraphrasing are beyond what it can search.

Another potential factor that may mar effectiveness of Turnitin or any other detection software is lack of knowledge about how to use and incorporate the technology especially in Nigeria where sufficient number of academics loath and always show their disdain for tasks that require the use of computers. This

explains why the software has not been greeted with unequivocal enthusiasm from all quarters.

Another limiting factor is the fact that cases of plagiarism centre on duplicated text will make it impossible for any plagiarism detection software to detect citation of any phantom paper. Phantom publications are the articles that are not in existence and not real but are cited by students. No software can detect act of plagiarism of student with phantom article since the article to compare his work with is not in existence.

Also, the free internet-based software that is known as "article rewriter" could inadvertently serve as another barrier militating against the effectiveness of Turnitin or any other software in that category. Article rewriter on the internet practically rewrites text that is pasted on it in many possible forms within a short period of time. All what plagiarists need do is to copy their work on article rewriter and click the button with 'next' to get the work done.

At this juncture and for clarification sake, it is important to indicate that this positional paper is not against the adoption and use of any plagiarism detection software in Nigerian universities and it is not one of the intentions of the work to castigate or undermine the effectiveness of any plagiarism detection software. Frankly, the researcher does not only believe that plagiarism is bad, unethical but should be discouraged in its entirety in academia. However, the thrust of this work is that deterring plagiarism among university students can be better achieved if holistic approach to the problem of plagiarism is adopted. That is, tackling the problem of plagiarism should not be limited to the use of software detection alone. In essence, academics should adopt proactive not retroactive measures. As established above, the software no doubt will expose plagiarists which ultimately will call for punitive measure/s for the so-called lawbreakers. But be as it may, punitive measure alone may not produce the desire result which is helping university students to imbibe the culture of writing ethically. Most students that are found guilty of plagiarism may likely be punished but not rehabilitated.

Based on the foregoing, understanding the level or depth of plagiarism in many Universities in Nigeria calls for beaming searchlight on how students are tutored and how instructions in intellectual property and academic attribution are given. Rising cases of plagiarism among university students in Nigeria is a reflection of carefree attitudes of some academic staff in teaching or familiarizing students with basics of writing. There can be no greater indictment of Nigerian Universities than that a significant number of undergraduates and postgraduates in the country are yet to come to terms with the rules and regulations of scholarly academic writing.

Failure to invest time in teaching students about how to avoid plagiarism by academics is a significant factor driving much of the cases of plagiarism in many higher institutions in Nigeria. Though, the relationship between lecturer not teaching the rudiments of scholarly writing and rate of involvement of students in the act of plagiarism is less commented on in the literature, yet the findings of Orim et al. (2012) showed that the level of educating or teaching rudiments of writing scholarly paper in Nigerian Universities is low or totally not existing in some places, and alarmingly few academic staff are interested in ensuring students understand this.

V. CONCLUSION

Within the academic parlance in Nigeria, plagiarism is widely recognized as one of the unethical lapses in scholarly writing that requires a cross-cutting-task to counteract its spread. To achieve this, stakeholders should face the reality that there is no 'catch-all' or 'one size fits all' solution to plagiarism anywhere in the world. In relation to this, successful plagiarism prevention strategies must address factors that are contributing to the rising number of plagiarists in Nigerian universities. Also, as part of the measures to achieve this, the position of this paper is that adoption of any plagiarism detection software must be combined with realistic training and teaching of students about rules and regulations guiding intellectual property in order to achieve the desired result/s.

In academic circle in Nigeria, there is a growing call from stakeholders for a more pragmatic approach to achieving enduring solution to this morally reprehensible conundrum in academia. At the core of this call is the fact that the university administrators, academics and students have to jointly play a key role in achieving lasting solution to the problem. Successful anti-plagiarism programme should not only rely on the use of plagiarism detection software. Successful anti-plagiarism must be correctional and this requires mutual efforts at bringing together administrators in Universities, academic staff and even students, where these actors (University authority and academic members) will work together to set guidelines, rules and regulations, and provide easy to learn teaching rules of intellectual property. This is necessary so as to help plagiarists recover from their abhorrent act in Nigerian universities and to support acquisition of right attitude and skills needed for scholarly academic writing. It is crucial that various institutions provide students with opportunities and tools (basic training) that are efficient and adequate as far as imbibing regulations guiding intellectual property.

For academics, this group should ensure that students are aware of the ethical problems of plagiarism. Also, academic staff members in universities should as matter of necessity instill in students necessary and required values as far as

abstaining from plagiarism is concerned; and also let them realize why it is important to use their own words when paraphrasing. Students should be educated about how to present one's own idea without necessarily stealing other people's work. Also, university students should be taught about how to avoid unintentional plagiarism. There should be teaching about the use of automated tools to avoid slipping into the quagmire of plagiarism during writing; and more often than not to detect plagiarism when it occurs. Education/training has the potential to be a major driver of fighting plagiarism in Nigerian Universities. At best, it opens the heart of students' to new possibilities.

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