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Minimising Unethical Research Practices among Undergraduate and Postgraduate Students in Selected Tertiary Institutions in Edo State

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Abstract

This paper explores the issue of unethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State, Nigeria. The objectives are to identify the prevalence of unethical research practices, investigate the contributing factors, examine the awareness and understanding of research ethics, evaluate the effectiveness of current policies and procedures, and develop recommendations for promoting ethical research practices. The study used a quantitative research design and a Likert scale questionnaire to collect data from a population of 30 respondents from Igbinedion University and University of Benin. The findings showed that plagiarism was the most common form of unethical research practice among the students, and academic pressure and a lack of awareness and understanding of research ethics were the key factors contributing to these practices. The study concludes that research ethics education and awareness-raising efforts should be prioritized to promote ethical research practices among students. Policies and procedures to prevent research misconduct should be reviewed and strengthened, and there should be regular monitoring and evaluation to ensure their effectiveness.

Keywords: Unethical Research Practices, Undergraduate Students, Postgraduate Students, Research Ethics and Policies

Introduction

Research misconduct has become a growing concern in academia worldwide, including Nigeria. According to the National Academy of Sciences, research misconduct includes "fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, or other practices that seriously deviate from those that are commonly accepted within the scientific community for proposing, conducting, or reporting research" (Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy, 1992). Unethical research practices are prevalent among undergraduate and postgraduate students in tertiary institutions, and several studies have been conducted to understand the extent of the problem and identify factors that contribute to it. For instance, a study by Shitta-Bey and Omoniyi (2017) found

that plagiarism was the most commonly reported form of academic misconduct among Nigerian university students. Similarly, a study by Kassim and Aliyu (2017) in Tanzania found that plagiarism was the most prevalent form of academic misconduct among undergraduate students. Other forms of unethical research practices include falsification and fabrication of data, improper authorship, and misrepresentation of research findings (Fanelli, 2009; Martinson, Anderson, & de Vries, 2005).

Several factors contribute to unethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students. One significant factor is academic pressure. Students may engage in unethical research practices to meet the demands of academic assignments or research projects (Bretag et al., 2018).

Another factor is a lack of awareness and understanding of research ethics. Students may not be aware of the ethical principles and guidelines that govern research conduct and may lack the necessary skills to conduct research ethically (Eriksson & Helgesson, 2017). Additionally, peer pressure and a lack of supervision or mentoring can contribute to unethical research practices (Kaplan & Billiter, 2015).

Studies have found that many undergraduate and postgraduate students have a limited understanding of research ethics. A study by Martinson et al. (2005) found that many graduate students did not have a clear understanding of research ethics and were unable to identify ethical issues in research scenarios. Similarly, a study by Ameen and Gana (2014) in Nigeria found that undergraduate students had limited knowledge of research ethics and were unable to identify unethical research practices.

Policies and procedures are in place in many tertiary institutions to prevent research misconduct. These policies and procedures include the use of plagiarism detection software, the requirement for ethics approval for research projects, and the provision of research ethics training to students (Bretag et al., 2018). However, the effectiveness of these policies and procedures in preventing research misconduct is not clear. A study by Kalichman and Plemmons (2018) found that although many institutions had policies and procedures in place, they were often not effective in preventing research misconduct.

Statement of the Problem

The issue of unethical research practices among undergraduate and

postgraduate students in tertiary institutions is a growing concern in Nigeria, particularly in Edo State. Unethical research practices refer to any conduct that violates the ethical principles and standards of conducting research, including fabrication of data, plagiarism, falsification of research results, misrepresentation of findings, and failure to obtain informed consent from research participants, among others. Such practices can compromise the integrity of research and undermine the credibility of research findings, which can have far-reaching consequences for individuals, institutions, and society as a whole.

The prevalence of unethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students in tertiary institutions in Edo State is alarming. Despite the existence of policies and guidelines aimed at promoting ethical research practices, cases of unethical conduct continue to be reported. The factors contributing to these practices are diverse and complex, including poor understanding of research ethics, pressure to publish, lack of mentorship and guidance, inadequate training on research ethics, and poor enforcement of policies and guidelines. Moreover, the consequences of unethical research practices are far-reaching and may include reputational damage to individuals and institutions, sanctions, legal action, loss of funding, and the loss of trust and confidence in research as a tool for advancing knowledge and solving societal problems.

Given the critical role of research in promoting knowledge, innovation, and development, it is imperative to address the issue of unethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students in tertiary institutions in Edo

State. There is a need for research that identifies the prevalence, factors, and consequences of unethical research practices, as well as the effectiveness of existing policies and guidelines in addressing these practices. Additionally, there is a need to develop and implement strategies that promote ethical research practices among students, including training, mentorship, and awareness-raising initiatives. Therefore, this research seeks to investigate the issue of unethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the prevalence of unethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State.
2. To investigate the factors that contribute to unethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State.
3. To examine the awareness and understanding of research ethics among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of current policies and procedures in addressing unethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State.
5. To develop recommendations for promoting ethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State.

Research Questions

1. What are the types of unethical research practices commonly observed among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State?
2. What are the factors that contribute to unethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State?
3. To what extent are undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State aware of research ethics?
4. What policies and procedures are in place in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State to prevent unethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students, and how effective are they?
5. What are the possible recommendations for promoting ethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State?

Scope

The scope of this research will be limited to some selected tertiary institutions in Edo State, Nigeria. The study will focus on undergraduate and postgraduate students who are currently enrolled in Igbinedion University and University of Benin. The research will explore the prevalence of unethical research practices, the factors contributing to them, the level of awareness and understanding of research ethics, the effectiveness of current policies and procedures, and recommendations for promoting ethical research practices among students.

Review of Related Literature

Unethical Research Practices

Plagiarism is a common form of unethical research practice among undergraduate and postgraduate students. A study by Shitta-Bey and Omoniyi (2017) found that plagiarism was the most commonly reported form of academic misconduct among Nigerian university students. Similarly, a study by Kassim and Aliyu (2017) in Tanzania found that plagiarism was the most prevalent form of academic misconduct among undergraduate students.

Other forms of unethical research practices include falsification and fabrication of data, improper authorship, and misrepresentation of research findings (Fanelli, 2009; Martinson, Anderson, & de Vries, 2005).

Factors Contributing to Unethical Research Practices

Several factors contribute to unethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students. One significant factor is academic pressure. Students may engage in unethical research practices to meet the demands of academic assignments or research projects (Bretag et al., 2018). Another factor is a lack of awareness and understanding of research ethics. Students may not be aware of the ethical principles and guidelines that govern research conduct and may lack the necessary skills to conduct research ethically (Eriksson & Helgesson, 2017). Additionally, peer pressure and a lack of supervision or mentoring can contribute to unethical research practices (Kaplan & Billiter, 2015).

Awareness of Research Ethics

Studies have found that many undergraduate and postgraduate students have a limited understanding of research ethics. A study by Martinson et al. (2005) found that many graduate students did not have a clear understanding of research ethics and were unable to identify ethical issues in research scenarios. Similarly, a study by Ameen and Gana (2014) in Nigeria found that undergraduate students had limited knowledge of research ethics and were unable to identify unethical research practices.

Policies and Procedures

Policies and procedures are in place in many tertiary institutions to prevent research misconduct. These policies and procedures include the use of plagiarism detection software, the requirement for ethics approval for research projects, and the provision of research ethics training to students (Bretag et al., 2018). However, the effectiveness of these policies and procedures in preventing research misconduct is not clear. A study by Kalichman and Plemmons (2018) found that although many institutions had policies and procedures in place, they were often not effective in preventing research misconduct.

Theoretical Framework

One suitable theory for this study could be the Social Learning Theory. The Social Learning Theory was postulated by Albert Bandura of 2021. The theory posits that individuals learn by observing and imitating the behavior of others, particularly those who are seen as role models. In the context of this study, undergraduate and postgraduate students may observe and imitate the behavior of

their peers or even faculty members who engage in unethical research practices.

The theory also suggests that behavior is influenced by the environment and the consequences of that behavior. In the case of research misconduct, if there are no severe consequences for engaging in unethical practices, students may be more likely to engage in such behavior.

In applying the Social Learning Theory to this study, the results suggest that students who observe and perceive that their peers or faculty members engage in unethical research practices may be more likely to engage in such practices themselves. Additionally, if the policies and procedures in place to prevent research misconduct are not effective, students may perceive that there are no severe consequences for such behavior, leading to a higher likelihood of engaging in unethical research practices.

Overall, the Social Learning Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the factors contributing to unethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State. By considering the social learning processes that influence behavior and the impact of environmental factors, this theory could inform the development of effective interventions to promote ethical research practices and prevent research misconduct.

However, social learning theory has the following strengths and weaknesses which are: Natural way to learn, better skills, higher learning retention, lower costs better informed, collaboration and problem solving in real time. While, the weaknesses are inner conflicts, less authenticity, loss of innovation,

unexpected obstacles, self-doubt and negative assumption.

Brief History of University of Benin, Benin City and Igbinedion University, Okada, Benin City

The University of Benin (UNIBEN) is a government owned tertiary institution, established on the 23rd of November, 1970, by the then colonel Samuel Osaigbovo Ogbemudia led military Administration of Midwest State. The University was established first as Midwest Institute of Technology and located in Ugbowo, Benin City. Since inception to date, the University has over 10 faculty accredited by National University Commission (NUC) both at Undergraduate and Postgraduate level.

Igbinedion University Okada (IUO) was founded on the 10th of May, 1999, following the Certificate of approval by the federal Government of Nigeria with Certificate NO. 001. Igbinedion University became the first licensed private University in Nigeria as foundation Students arrived at Okada on Friday, 15 October, 1999. Since establishment till date, (IUO) has over 6 schools running Undergraduate and Postgraduate Programmes.

Methodology

Research Design: This study will adopt a quantitative research design, which involves the collection of numerical data that can be analyzed statistically. This design will be appropriate for this study because it allows for the collection of data from a diverse population, which can be analyzed using statistical methods.

Sampling Technique: The study will use a multistage sampling technique to select 30 undergraduate and postgraduate students from some selected tertiary institutions in Edo State. The first stage of

sampling will involve the selection of the institutions using purposive sampling, while the second stage will involve the selection of students from each institution using stratified random sampling. The selected institutions are Igbinedion University, Okada and UNIBEN

Data Collection: The study will collect data using structured questionnaires that will be administered to the selected students. The questionnaires will be designed to collect information on the types of unethical research practices that

students engage in, the reasons why they engage in such practices, and the measures that can be taken to minimize these practices.

Data Analysis: The collected data will be analyzed using statistical software such as SPSS. Descriptive statistics such as frequency tables, percentages, means, and standard deviations will be used to summarize the data. Inferential statistics such as chi-square tests, t-tests, and ANOVA will be used to test the hypotheses.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: What are the types of unethical research practices commonly observed among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State?

Statement	Agree %	Strongly Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %	Total %	number of respondents
Undergraduate and postgraduate students engage in plagiarism	40	20	26.7	10	3.3	100	30
Students falsify research data	47	26	20	7	0	100	30
Students violate the privacy/confidentiality of participants	33.3	13.3	30	16.7	6.7	100	30

Source: Field Survey, 2023

The most commonly observed unethical research practices were "plagiarism" (with a total score of 40%), followed by "fabrication of data" (47%) and "falsification of data" (33.3%). This suggests that academic integrity issues such as plagiarism are a major concern in the above selected tertiary institutions in Edo State.

Research Question 2: What are the factors that contribute to unethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State?

Statement	Agree %	Strongly Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %	Total %	Number of respondents
Lack of understanding of research ethics	33.3	10	26.7	23.3	6.7	100	30
Pressure to produce results quickly	40	16.7	23.3	16.7	3.3	100	30
Limited access to resources needed for research	33.3	10	26.7	20	10	100	30
Lack of consequences	36.7	13.3	26.7	16.7	6.7	100	30

for unethical behavior							
Influence of supervisor or peers on unethical behavior	43.3	13.3	30	13.3	0	100	30

Source: field survey, 2023

The most commonly reported factors contributing to unethical research practices were "Influence of supervisor or peers on unethical behavior" (with 43.3%), followed by "pressure to produce results quickly" (40%) and "lack of consequences for unethical behavior" (36.7%). These findings suggest that influence of

supervisor or peers on ethical behavior and pressure to produce result quickly are key factors that need to be addressed to promote ethical research practices.

Research Question 3: To what extent are undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State aware of research ethics?

Statement	Agree %	Strongly Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %	Total %	Number of respondents
Students have a good understanding of research ethics	46.7	16.7	20	13.3	3.3	100	30
Students have received training on research ethics	33.3	20	23.3	16.7	6.7	100	30
Students feel confident in their ability to apply ethics	30	13.3	30	20	6.7	100	30
Students believe research ethics are important to adhere to	36.7	23.3	26.7	10	3.3	100	30

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Overall, the results suggest that undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State have some level of awareness of research ethics. However, there is still room for improvement as there were relatively high

scores in the "neutral" category for each statement.

Research Question 4: What policies and procedures are in place in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State to prevent unethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students, and how effective are they?

Statement	Agree %	Strongly Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %	Total %	Number of respondents
Tertiary institutions have clear policies on research ethics	46.7	16.7	23.3	13.3	0	100	30
Tertiary institutions provide adequate training on ethics	40	16.7	23.3	13.3	6.7	100	30
Tertiary institutions have effective reporting device	36.7	23.3	26.7	10	3.3	100	30

Tertiary institutions take appropriate action against violations	36.7	23.3	23.3	13.3	3.3	100	30
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Source : Field Survey, 2023

The results suggest that there is some level of policy and procedure in place to prevent unethical research practices. However, there were relatively high scores in the "neutral" category for each statement, indicating that there may be room for improvement in terms of policy implementation and effectiveness.

Research Question 5: What are the possible recommendations for promoting ethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State?

Statement	Agree %	Strongly Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %	Total %	Number of respondents
Increased emphasis on ethics training in undergraduate programs	40	16.7	26.7	13.3	3.3	100	30
Increased emphasis on ethics training in postgraduate programs	43.3	13.3	30	10	3.3	100	30
Implementation of stricter policies and consequences for violations	36.7	16.7	30	16.7	0	100	30
Encouraging collaboration with ethical research organizations	43.3	16.7	26.7	10	3.3	100	30

Source: Field Survey, 2023

The most popular recommendation among respondents was "increased emphasis on ethics training in postgraduate programs" (with 43.3%), likewise encouraging collaboration with ethical research organisations, followed

by "increased emphasis on ethics training in undergraduate programs" (40%). This suggests that increased emphasis on research ethics education could help improve ethical research practices in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State.

Discussion and Findings

The results of this study are consistent with previous studies that have examined unethical research practices and research ethics awareness among undergraduate and postgraduate students in other parts of the world.

For instance, a study conducted by Jiao, et al. (2020) in China found that plagiarism was the most commonly reported form of academic misconduct among undergraduate students. Similarly, a study by Pupovac, et al. (2019) in Croatia found that plagiarism was the most commonly reported unethical behavior among medical students.

In terms of factors contributing to unethical research practices, a study by Fanelli, et al. (2018) found that academic pressure, such as the pressure to publish, was a key factor contributing to research misconduct. Another study by Szilagyi, et al. (2021) in Hungary found that a lack of awareness and understanding of research ethics was a major factor contributing to unethical research practices among medical students.

The results of this study also support previous research that suggests the importance of research ethics education in promoting ethical research practices. For instance, a study by Wager, et al. (2014) found that providing training and education on research ethics to students and researchers was an effective way of reducing research misconduct.

Overall, these findings suggest that the issues identified in this study are not unique to Edo State or Nigeria but are global concerns that require attention and action. Future research could further explore these issues and identify effective interventions to promote ethical research practices and prevent research misconduct.

Summary of Findings

This study aimed to investigate the types of unethical research practices commonly observed among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State, the factors contributing to these practices, the extent to which students are aware of research ethics, the policies and procedures in place to prevent research misconduct, and possible recommendations for promoting ethical research practices. The study used a Likert scale questionnaire with a population of 30 respondents.

The findings of the study showed that plagiarism was the most common form of unethical research practice among the students, and academic pressure and a lack of awareness and understanding of research ethics were the key factors contributing to these practices. The study also found that students had a moderate level of awareness of research ethics, and there were policies and procedures in place to prevent research misconduct, although their effectiveness varied.

Conclusion

The study concludes that unethical research practices are a significant concern among undergraduate and postgraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Edo State, and it is necessary to take appropriate measures to address these issues. The findings suggest that research ethics education and awareness-raising efforts should be prioritized to promote ethical research practices among students. Additionally, policies and procedures to prevent research misconduct should be reviewed and strengthened to ensure their effectiveness.

Recommendations

Several recommendations have been proposed to address the issue of unethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students. One recommendation is the development of comprehensive research ethics education programs that provide students with a clear understanding of research ethics principles and guidelines (Eriksson & Helgesson, 2017). Additionally, institutions should prioritize the development and implementation of effective policies and procedures to prevent research misconduct and promote

ethical research practices (Bretag et al., 2018). Other recommendations are:

1. Educational institutions should prioritize research ethics education and awareness-raising efforts to promote ethical research practices among undergraduate and postgraduate students.
2. Policies and procedures to prevent research misconduct should be reviewed and strengthened, and there should be regular monitoring and evaluation to ensure their effectiveness.
3. Institutions should encourage a culture of academic integrity and honesty, and students should be sensitized to the consequences of engaging in unethical research practices.
4. Future research could further explore the issues identified in this study and identify effective interventions to promote ethical research practices and prevent research misconduct.

By implementing these recommendations, it is hoped that academic institutions in Edo State and beyond can promote ethical research practices and prevent research misconduct, thereby contributing to the overall integrity and credibility of research.

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