Navigating Academic Integrity: Postgraduate Students' Awareness of Plagiarism and the Library's Preventive Role

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Navigating Academic Integrity: Postgraduate Students' Awareness of Plagiarism and the Library's Preventive Role

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Abstract

Academic integrity forms the cornerstone of ethical scholarship, ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of the academic endeavor. Academic dishonesty encompasses a range of behaviors, including plagiarism, cheating, fabricating data, and unauthorized collaboration. The study therefore focused on plagiarism as a form of academic dishonesty. Plagiarism takes various forms, ranging from verbatim copying without proper citation to subtle paraphrasing without acknowledging the original source. The study examines the relationship between postgraduate students' awareness of plagiarism and academic integrity and investigates the role of academic libraries in deterring plagiarism and promoting academic integrity among postgraduate students in Kenyan universities. The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design with both quantitative and qualitative data. It targeted postgraduate students (n=678) and library staff (n=3) in three public universities selected based on their postgraduate enrollment figures. The study found a significant disconnect between students' self-perceived understanding of plagiarism and their actual application of academic integrity principles. The library plays a crucial role in generating research trust and academic integrity among postgraduate students, though challenges persist in reaching all students effectively. The study concludes that comprehensive, skill-based interventions integrated throughout the curriculum are needed to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application of academic integrity principles.

Keywords: *Plagiarism, academic integrity, postgraduate students, academic libraries, Kenya*

1. Introduction

Academic integrity forms the foundation of ethical scholarship, based on principles of honesty, transparency, and responsible conduct in academic pursuits (Cotton et al., 2023). Academic dishonesty manifests in various forms, with plagiarism being particularly prevalent and concerning in academic environments. Plagiarism encompasses multiple behaviors - from direct copying without citation to subtle paraphrasing without acknowledgment of original sources, and increasingly, the use of artificial intelligence tools to generate academic content (Eaton, 2021). The emergence of AI tools like ChatGPT, CLAUDE & GEMINI has intensified concerns about academic integrity, as using these platforms to generate academic work without proper acknowledgment constitutes a form of plagiarism (Dehouche, 2021). This technological evolution has created new challenges for institutions in defining, detecting, and addressing academic misconduct. Postgraduate students occupy a unique position within the academic community. As emerging scholars who will shape future research practices, they carry a special responsibility to uphold academic integrity in their contributions (Tran, 2021). Despite this expectation, studies indicate that plagiarism remains problematic among postgraduate students globally (Foltýnek et al., 2019). In Kenya specifically, research misconduct, including plagiarism, has been increasing due to inadequate supervision, insufficient training on academic writing, and limited understanding of citation practices (Nakitare & Otike, 2022; Alusa & Kimani, 2012). According to Nakitare and Otike (2022), as universities strive to increase their research output and global rankings, ensuring academic integrity among researchers, particularly postgraduate students, has become increasingly important.

The Kenyan academic context presents particular challenges regarding plagiarism. Unlike Western institutions with well-established academic integrity infrastructure, many Kenyan universities are still developing comprehensive policies and educational approaches to address plagiarism (Nabee et al., 2020). Cultural factors, educational backgrounds, and institutional resource constraints all influence how plagiarism is perceived and addressed within Kenyan higher education institutions. Within this context, academic libraries serve a crucial role in promoting ethical research practices. Libraries provide not only access to reliable sources but also guidance on citation practices, plagiarism detection tools, and educational resources that support academic integrity (Ewing & Hlavach, 2020). Librarians, with their specialized knowledge of information management and research practices, are well-positioned to collaborate with faculty in educating students about plagiarism and ethical writing (Michalak et al., 2018). This role is particularly significant in contexts where formal information literacy has not been fully integrated into institutional curricula (Bell, 2018; Burger, 2018; Idiegbeyan-Ose et al., 2019; O'Donnell et al., 2020).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In Kenya, plagiarism rates have been increasing, with studies indicating growth in research misconduct due to factors including inadequate supervision, insufficient training, and limited institutional resources (Nakitare & Otike, 2022; Alusa & Kimani, 2012). The effects of plagiarism on academic integrity have been documented globally, but research specifically

addressing the Kenyan context remains limited, particularly concerning postgraduate students who represent the future of the country's academic leadership. These gaps raise important questions about whether plagiarism should be approached primarily as an issue of academic integrity, skills development, or institutional policy within Kenyan universities. While academic libraries are often positioned as resources for academic integrity support, their effectiveness and impact in deterring plagiarism among postgraduate students in Kenya has not been systematically studied.

1.2 Research Objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine postgraduate students' awareness of plagiarism and their application of academic integrity principles.

2. To assess the role of academic libraries in deterring plagiarism and promoting academic integrity among postgraduate students in Kenyan universities

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Theoretical and Conceptual Background
Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The study approaches plagiarism through the theoretical framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) developed by Ajzen (1991). Despite various preventative measures implemented in universities (Cronan, Mullins, & Douglas, 2018), plagiarism continues to be a significant concern in academic settings worldwide, including Kenya. The TPB provides a useful framework for understanding this persistence, as it suggests that behavior is influenced by three key components: attitudes (evaluations about the behavior), subjective norms (perceived social pressure), and perceived behavioral control (self-efficacy regarding the behavior). Within the context of plagiarism in Kenyan universities, the TPB suggests that postgraduate students' decisions to engage in or avoid plagiarism are influenced by their attitudes toward the behavior (whether they view it as wrong), their perceptions of how peers and faculty view plagiarism (subjective norms), and their perceived ability to properly cite sources and produce original work (behavioral control).

2.2 Awareness of Plagiarism

Plagiarism awareness is crucial for maintaining academic integrity at the postgraduate level, with evidence suggesting that many cases of plagiarism stem from knowledge gaps rather than deliberate misconduct (Ho, 2021). The complexity of plagiarism awareness is evident in research showing multiple motivations: while some students intentionally plagiarize to gain academic advantage (Nguyen & Buckingham, 2019; Tran, 2021), others do so unknowingly due to insufficient understanding of citation practices or cultural differences in knowledge attribution (Ho, 2021). This issue is particularly significant for postgraduate students who are expected to produce original research contributions (Tran, 2021).

Recent studies document concerning increases in plagiarism globally (Sankar, 2020; Ndebele, 2020; Raj et al., 2021; Cheers, Lin, & Smith, 2021; Ali, 2021). Cheers et al. (2021)

attribute this trend partly to institutional failures in educating students about proper citation and academic integrity. However, research also reveals significant regional variations in attitudes toward plagiarism. Studies indicate that students in Iran (Babaii & Nejadghanbar, 2017) and China (Du, 2020) show more relaxed perspectives toward certain forms of plagiarism compared to those in Malawi (Selemani et al., 2018), Australia (Ndebele, 2020), and internationally educated students (Tran et al., 2022).

Within the Kenyan context, limited research exists on plagiarism awareness among postgraduate students. The few available studies (Nakitare & Otike, 2022; Alusa & Kimani, 2012) suggest that while plagiarism is recognized as an issue, institutional responses have been inconsistent. Factors such as large class sizes, limited supervision capacity, and inadequate technology infrastructure may contribute to both plagiarism occurrence and detection challenges in Kenyan universities.

2.3 Role of Academic Libraries in Deterring Plagiarism

Academic libraries serve as central resources for promoting academic integrity through collaboration with faculty to develop information literacy programs that teach students ethical information use and critical thinking skills (Idiegbeyan-ose et al., 2018). These programs typically address proper citation practices, ethical use of information, and strategies for avoiding plagiarism. Libraries provide research support services including citation guidance, reference management tools, and assistance with literature reviews (Ajiboye et al., 2020; Collier, 2017). These services help reduce unintentional plagiarism by improving students' ability to navigate sources and cite them appropriately (Weber & Royster, 2019). The integration of digital tools, including plagiarism detection software, has further expanded libraries' capacity to support academic integrity efforts.

Research on U.S. libraries documents strategies ranging from plagiarism detection software implementation to faculty workshops, information literacy programs, and the development of Open Educational Resources (Smith & Jones, 2020; Cotton et al., 2023; Cimeri, 2019). Similarly, studies from Pakistan (Khan et al., 2021) and research from Kenya (Nakitare & Otike, 2022; Alusa & Kimani, 2012) demonstrate that while library programs can be effective in raising awareness about plagiarism, challenges persist in enforcing policies and ensuring proper student training.

Academic libraries in Kenya face unique challenges in their anti-plagiarism efforts. Resource constraints may limit access to plagiarism detection software and staffing for specialized academic integrity programs. Additionally, the integration of library services with departmental curricula varies significantly across institutions, potentially creating inconsistencies in how plagiarism prevention is addressed. Despite available research on academic integrity initiatives (Bell, 2018) and tools like Turnitin (Javaeed et al., 2019), significant gaps remain in understanding regional variations in library approaches to plagiarism prevention. Particularly understudied are the potential integration of emerging technologies like AI detection tools, the role of libraries in addressing cultural factors influencing plagiarism, and the effectiveness of plagiarism detection tools on student learning and ethical writing practices in Kenya.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to examine plagiarism awareness and academic integrity practices among postgraduate students and the role of academic libraries in deterring plagiarism. The convergent design enabled simultaneous collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, with integration occurring during the analysis and interpretation phases.

3.2 Study Population and Sampling

The study targeted postgraduate students conducting thesis research at Kenya's three among the 6 top ranked public universities according to webometrics and postgraduate enrollment figures. The study population comprised 330 PhD and 378 Master's students (total N=708) across various disciplines. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation across degree levels and disciplines. The sample size was determined using Yamane's formula with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. From this sample, 496 complete responses were received, representing a response rate of 70%. Additionally, researchers purposively selected three library personnel (one from each university) responsible for plagiarism detection and prevention initiatives. These participants were selected based on their direct involvement in academic integrity programs and services, providing expert perspectives on library roles in deterring plagiarism.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

Data collection employed multiple instruments to capture both quantitative and qualitative information: A structured questionnaire was administered to postgraduate students. In-depth interviews were conducted with three library personnel responsible for academic integrity initiatives at their respective institutions. Interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Quantitative data collection occurred through online administration of the questionnaire using Google Forms, with the link distributed via institutional email systems after obtaining necessary permissions from respective universities. Interviews were conducted in private offices to ensure confidentiality and were audio-recorded for accurate transcription.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research principles throughout the process. Institutional approval was obtained from each participating university. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with clear explanations of research purposes, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw without consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of codes rather than names in data analysis and reporting.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis employed descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and variances) to summarize responses on the Likert-scale items. Additionally, inferential statistics including Spearman's rank correlation were used to examine relationships between plagiarism awareness and academic integrity perceptions, acknowledging the ordinal nature of Likert data. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred through a side-by-side comparison approach.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Relationship between Postgraduate Students' Awareness of Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

Table 1: Awareness of Plagiarism Descriptive Statistics

No.	Statement	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Variance
1	What constitutes plagiarism	496	4.30	.881	.775
2	Different forms of plagiarism	496	3.98	1.005	1.010
3	When necessary to cite sources	496	4.14	.911	.830
4	Know how to properly cite sources	496	4.03	.907	.823
5	Understand the consequences of plagiarism	496	4.40	.832	.692
6	Understanding consequences of plagiarism motivates to avoid it	496	4.25	.998	.996
7	My attitude towards plagiarism has become more negative as my knowledge of it has increased	496	3.64	1.241	1.541
8	Knowing more about plagiarism has made me more vigilant in my research work	496	4.26	.898	.806
9	My understanding of plagiarism has strengthened my commitment to academic honesty	496	4.29	.879	.772
10	Knowledge of plagiarism helps me maintain honesty in my academic pursuits	496	4.34	.823	.677
11	My awareness of plagiarism contributes to a culture of trust in my research environment	496	4.22	.829	.688
12	My knowledge of plagiarism helps me ensure fair representation of others' work in my research	496	4.28	.839	.704
13	Being well-informed about plagiarism has increased my sense of responsibility in research writing	496	4.34	.772	.596
14	My knowledge of plagiarism motivates me to take responsibility for the originality of my research	496	4.30	.804	.646
15	My level of knowledge about plagiarism directly influences my adherence to academic integrity principles	496	4.23	.795	.632
16	Understanding the consequences of plagiarism has strengthened my commitment to academic honesty	496	4.27	.805	.648
17	My attitude towards plagiarism is closely related to my overall sense of academic integrity	496	4.14	.911	.830
18	The frequency with which I properly cite sources is a reflection of my commitment to academic integrity	496	4.13	.794	.630

Source: Field Data 2025

Research findings reveal a significant disconnect between postgraduate students' self-reported understanding of plagiarism and their actual application of academic integrity principles in practice. Quantitative data indicates high levels of awareness regarding basic plagiarism concepts (Mean=4.30, SD=0.881) and citation requirements (Mean=4.14, SD=0.911), suggesting that students believe they understand what constitutes plagiarism and when citations are necessary. This self-perception is consistent across items measuring knowledge dimensions of plagiarism awareness, with most means exceeding 4.0 on the 5-point scale. However, contrast emerges from interviews, highlighting widespread issues with practical application of this theoretical knowledge. As one library staff member noted: "*We consistently see a gap between what students say they know about plagiarism and what their work demonstrates. Many still submit work with significant citation problems.*" This observation is supported by a lower mean score (3.98, SD=1.005) than general plagiarism awareness from qualitative findings, suggesting that students may recognize obvious plagiarism while missing more subtle forms of academic dishonesty.

The interview data identified several specific manifestations of this knowledge-practice gap. Patchwork plagiarism, where students combine text from multiple sources with minimal rewriting, emerged as a common problem across disciplines. As another library staff participant explained: "*Students often produce what we call 'mosaic plagiarism'. They understand direct copying is wrong but lack the skills to properly synthesize information.*" This finding aligns with Spearman's rank correlation analysis, which revealed a moderate positive correlation between awareness of plagiarism concepts and self-reported citation practices (rs=0.42, p<0.001), but a weaker relationship between understanding different plagiarism forms and actual citation behavior (rs=0.28, p<0.001). This suggests that while general awareness influences intention, specific knowledge about varied plagiarism forms may be lacking. Improper paraphrasing was highlighted by all three interviewees as the most prevalent form of plagiarism among postgraduate students. Students appear to understand that direct copying requires citation but struggle with properly rewording content while maintaining original meaning. This finding is particularly significant as it suggests that the issue is not merely one of awareness but also of skill development – students may know what they should avoid but lack the academic writing skills to implement proper practices.

Other concerning patterns emerged from the qualitative data, including: "*Inadequate in-text citations despite comprehensive bibliographies*", "*citation of non-existent sources to appear scholarly*", "*emerging challenges with AI-generated content that students may not recognize as requiring attribution*". Despite strong awareness of consequences (Mean=4.40, SD=0.832) serving as a reported deterrent for intentional plagiarism, the prevalence of these more subtle forms suggests that consequences awareness alone is insufficient without corresponding skills development. This aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior framework, suggesting that while attitudes toward plagiarism may be negative (influencing intention), perceived behavioral control (skills and ability to properly cite and paraphrase) may be lacking.

4.2 Role of Academic Libraries in Deterring Plagiarism and Postgraduate Academic Integrity

Table 2: Role of Academic Libraries in Deterring Plagiarism Descriptive Statistics

No.	Statement	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Variance
1	Workshops and training sessions offered by the university library have helped me understand proper citation practices and avoid plagiarism	496	3.56	1.081	1.169
2	The availability of plagiarism detection software through the university library encourages me to submit original work and upholds academic integrity	496	4.06	.841	.707
3	Access to resources and support from the university library makes me more likely to prioritize honesty in my research	496	4.01	.912	.832
4	The library's emphasis on ethical research practices fosters a sense of trust in my research	496	4.06	.841	.707
5	Utilizing library resources to ensure proper citation helps to ensure fairness for all postgraduate students in their research	496	4.06	.831	.691
6	The library's efforts to combat plagiarism have positively influenced my commitment to academic honesty in my research	496	3.96	.920	.847
7	Librarians are knowledgeable and supportive in assisting students with plagiarism concerns	496	3.89	.970	.941
8	Academic libraries play a crucial role in promoting academic integrity among postgraduate students	496	4.08	.922	.850

Source: Field data 2025

Library workshops and training sessions received moderately satisfactory ratings (Mean=3.56, SD=1.081), with qualitative insights revealing considerable variation in effectiveness across different programs and student populations. As one library staff member explained: "*Our workshops reach only a fraction of students, and attendance is often driven by requirement rather than interest. We're constantly trying to make these sessions more engaging and relevant to specific disciplines.*" This sentiment was echoed by another interviewee who noted that "*one-size-fits-all approaches to plagiarism education had limited effectiveness*". However, despite these challenges, students reported strong trust in librarians regarding plagiarism concerns (Mean=3.89, SD=0.970). This apparent contradiction may be explained by interview data suggesting that "*while general workshops have limitations, specialized approaches – including discipline-specific workshops, individual consultations, and customized citation style guides – are more positively received*". Text matching software emerged as an effective deterrent according to quantitative data (Mean=4.06, SD=0.841). However, qualitative findings revealed complexity in software implementation, with one library staff member noting: "*Some departments resist implementing plagiarism detection software because they worry it creates a climate of suspicion. We're working to reframe these tools as educational rather than punitive.*" This tension between surveillance and education in plagiarism prevention reflects broader debates in academic integrity literature (Weber & Royster, 2019).

Additionally, interviewees noted student perceptions of these tools as "*catching cheaters*" rather than supporting learning, suggesting a need for reframing how detection software is

presented and implemented. The library's contribution to research trust and academic integrity among postgraduate students received high ratings (Mean=4.06, SD=0.841; Mean=4.08, SD=0.922), with qualitative data providing context for this impact. Interviewees described how "*library-led discussions about research ethics created spaces for students to explore complex integrity issues*". One interviewee highlighted: "*When we organize peer discussion forums about research integrity, students often share dilemmas they face and learn from each other's experiences. These informal learning opportunities seem particularly effective with postgraduate students.*" The development of peer networks and community norms around academic integrity emerged as a significant theme in how libraries support academic honesty. All three interviewees mentioned initiatives that fostered conversations about consequences of ethical breaches for both individual researchers and the broader academic community.

The qualitative data also emphasized the importance of tailored approaches addressing diverse student needs, with particular attention to international students and those from educational backgrounds with different citation traditions. As one participant noted: "*We've found that peer mentoring programs where experienced postgraduate students guide newer ones are especially effective for international students who may have different understandings of citation practices.*" All three interviewees converged on the importance of integrating academic integrity throughout the curriculum rather than treating it as a separate topic. They noted that while one-to-one consultations were highly effective in changing behavior, their reach was limited due to resource constraints. Similarly, plagiarism awareness campaigns generated short-term interest but had minimal long-term impact without structural supports.

5. Discussion

The study established a considerable disconnect between theoretical knowledge possessed by postgraduate students regarding plagiarism and the actual practice of ethical writing. This gap between knowing and doing represents a significant challenge for academic integrity promotion in Kenyan universities. The findings align with international research suggesting that knowledge alone is insufficient for preventing plagiarism (Ho, 2021; Tran, 2021), but extend this understanding by identifying specific manifestations of this disconnect in the Kenyan postgraduate context.

The range of plagiarism behaviors identified – from unintentional (poorly executed paraphrasing despite understanding basic rules) to deliberate (copying from obscure sources) – suggests that different types of interventions may be needed for different scenarios. This complexity aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior framework, which suggests that behavior is influenced by multiple factors beyond knowledge, including attitudes, perceived norms, and behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). The persistence of what interviewees termed "covert plagiarism" despite high awareness of consequences indicates that fear of punishment alone is insufficient to ensure academic integrity.

Libraries contribute significantly to establishing research trust and promoting academic

integrity, yet face challenges in effectively implementing comprehensive plagiarism prevention strategies. Respondents acknowledged that while libraries actively provide resources for proper citation and offer guidance on avoiding plagiarism, there remains a notable gap between information provision and successful behavioral change among students.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

The study provides evidence of a gap between postgraduate students' self-reported awareness of plagiarism and their actual plagiarism behavior. The findings suggest that while students generally perceive themselves as knowledgeable about plagiarism, this awareness does not always translate into ethical academic practices. The study also underscores the significant role of academic libraries in fostering academic integrity. Libraries and librarians are actively involved in plagiarism prevention through education, resources, and technology. However, their efforts are often hampered by challenges such as student disengagement and limited institutional support.

Based on the findings, the recommendations were as follows:

1. Universities should establish comprehensive academic integrity frameworks that include clear policies, adequate training resources, and consistent enforcement mechanisms. This systemic approach is fundamental as it creates the necessary structure for all other integrity initiatives to function effectively.

2. Academic libraries should receive increased funding and staffing to expand their crucial role in plagiarism prevention. This includes developing targeted interventions for postgraduate students, incorporating emerging technologies like AI detection tools, and fostering closer faculty-library collaboration to integrate academic integrity education throughout the curriculum.

3. Moving beyond basic definitions of plagiarism, universities and libraries should implement strategies that address the underlying ethical principles of academic integrity. This involves creating opportunities for students to reflect on their own academic practices and fostering open dialogue about integrity issues.

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