

## **Academic dishonesty, a cancer devouring academia: A Case Study of Academic Dishonesty at Two Zimbabwean Universities.**

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### **Abstract**

*Academic dishonesty has dominated academia for a long time with researchers defining it, identifying its causes, forms, and probable ways of reducing or stopping it. The outbreak of COVID-19 saw many institutions of higher learning adopt technology in their teaching and learning which brought about new forms of academic dishonesty. This study aims to understand the perceptions and views of students (n=6) from two different universities in Zimbabwe and writers (n=2) about practicing academic dishonesty when writing their Bachelor dissertations. This qualitative study adopted an explanatory case study research design. Interviews were mainly used for data collection and data was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen phenomenological data analysis process. The study results showed that students practice academic dishonesty when writing their dissertations by manipulating the plagiarism check index, ghost writing, and spousal academic-based dishonesty. The students also gave reasons for practicing academic dishonesty, and the flaws of academic dishonesty. The recommendations of the study are varied but what stands out most is for academic systems to come up with a system that may do away with the current structure of dissertation writing.*

**Keywords:** academic dishonesty, dissertation, ghost writing, plagiarism reduction, spousal academic dishonesty

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## 1.1 Introduction

There is evidence locally and internationally that university students practice academic dishonesty that is threatening institutions' integrity (Warinda, 2016). Many authors have defined academic dishonesty (Akakandelwa, Jain, & Wamundila, 2013; Bachore, 2016; Marshall & Vernon, 2017; Sayed & Lento, 2015; Thomas & De Bruin, 2015) but there is no universally accepted definition. For this research paper, a working definition was provided by Northern Illinois University (NIU). "Academic dishonesty refers to committing or contributing to dishonest acts by those engaged in teaching, learning, research, and related academic activities ..." (Cizek, 2003; Whitley, Jr. & Keith-Spiegel, 2002 as cited by NIU, 2022).

Academic dishonesty may be intentional or unintentional, basically leading to a violation or breach of academic integrity. It is important to state that academic dishonesty is not practiced by students alone, but also includes all those in academia including lecturers and researchers. The prevalence of academic dishonesty by students is alarming (Skshidlevsky, 2022). Regarding students' academic dishonesty, some studies have found that some students do not know what constitutes academic dishonesty (De Lambert, Ellen, & Taylor, 2003) and academic integrity (Locquiano & Ives, 2020) and this may be linked to institutions failing to educate their students in that regard (Adele & De Bruin, 2012). Some studies refute this argument stating that even if students are aware of their institutions' academic dishonesty policies and may think twice before doing it (Warinda, 2016) they are likely to do it because they may have done it before at high school hence it has become a culture (Abel, Sima, Shavega, & Warinda, 2016). Although some students tend to be aware of the unethical nature of academic dishonesty, they would still practice it (Hasri, Supar, Azman, Sharip, & Yamin, 2022).

Some studies have shown that demographic variables have no relationship with the practice of academic dishonesty (Bennett, 2005; Warinda & Muchenje, 2013), although Hasri, et al. (2022) found that more female students admitted to having practiced academic dishonesty than males. There is also no correlation between incidences of academic dishonesty and age (Hasri, et al., 2022) although there is a general belief in the literature that younger students tend to practice it more than older ones.

## **2.1 Perpetrators of academic dishonesty and their reasons**

Academic dishonesty is practiced by many in academia, but several studies have focused on students in high schools and tertiary institutions (Bachore, 2016; Kasayira, Musingarabwi, Nyanhongo, Chipandambira, & Sodi, 2007; Miranda & Freire, 2011; Sayed & Lento, 2015; Skshidlevsky, 2022). A study by Lin and Wen (2007) showed that freshmen practiced more academic dishonesty behaviors than other classes. Similarly, Warinda (2016) and Warinda and Muchenje (2013) found that full-time students, who are mostly young and straight from high school tended to practice academic dishonesty in comparison to part-time and older students. Working students were also found to practice academic dishonesty in courses they perceived as challenging (Premeaux, 2005).

The reasons for practicing academic dishonesty provided for in the literature vary from study to study. Students tend to practice academic dishonesty due to time management pressures, the difficulty of tests, pressure to get good grades (Bachore, 2016), and also, they believe that their friends also do the same (Hasri, et. al., 2022). Although some studies have shown that students are motivated to cheat to get better grades (Kasayira, et al., 2007), Warinda and Muchenje (2013) found that the main reason was to avoid failing the course. Failure to prepare enough for the exam or test is also another major reason for practicing academic dishonesty (Tsekea, Zivanai, & Madziko, 2021). The social environment, especially in Zimbabwe, where society is a collectivist one, promotes teamwork and mutual assistance. The group orientation supersedes individualism, where individuals are expected to look after themselves, whereas in Zimbabwe there is a propensity for students to assist others academically. But this is not unique – to Zimbabwe, a Taiwanese study found that social pressure to assist or help others was one of the major reasons for practicing academic dishonesty (Lin & Wen, 2007).

Some students practice academic dishonesty because they consider themselves academically challenged (Warinda, 2016). Added to this are general extrinsic motivations (good salaries, up-scale lifestyle, etc.) that students have for future lucrative job opportunities (Locquiano & Ives, 2020) if they graduate, hence the desire and temptation to practice academic dishonesty. Some students did not view academic dishonesty as a bad practice (Warinda & Muchenje, 2013), but considered

it a part of the education process and system. Some students have normalized academic dishonesty (Miranda & Freire, 2011) such that the zeal to stop the practice becomes unthinkable and difficult. McCabe, Trevino, and Butterfield (2001) add that the failure of institutions, particularly faculties to discourage and dissuade academic dishonesty practices justifies students' continuance in practicing it. Some students have noted that institutions are not strict in addressing these cases of academic dishonesty, hence they continue to practice it. Students who practiced academic dishonesty did not want to be known by their friends as they would lose respect in their eyes (Warinda & Muchenje, 2013).

## **2.2 Forms of academic dishonesty**

Literature is awash with different forms of academic dishonesty and these seem to be changing over time. The proliferation of technology and the recent outbreak of COVID-19 has witnessed new forms of academic dishonesty. This is so because most institutions of higher learning migrated to online learning to ensure the continuation of the learning process (Hasri, et al., 2022).

Students tended to practice academic dishonesty by helping a student with an assignment, copying other students' assignments, giving another student answers in an exam, (Lin & Wen, 2007; Warinda, 2016), submitting an assignment written by someone else, and not giving credit to a published source (Bachore, 2016) and having the exam question in advance (Kasayira, et al., 2007). Exchanging answer sheets in an exam is mostly done when friends sit next to each other (Warinda, 2016) and some institutions are now addressing this through a computer-generated sitting plan.

Male lecturers in institutions of higher learning tend to practice academic dishonesty by inappropriately assisting female students (Kasayira, et al., 2007) or by leaking an exam paper and giving additional reading material (Chireshe, 2014). This will in turn generate a ripple effect with male students practicing academic dishonesty openly in the full glare of the said lecturers knowing that they will not report them for fear of being exposed for their inappropriate conduct with female learners. They thus turn a blind eye to those who practice academic dishonesty (Chireshe, 2014). It will be coming to a question of who will police who, when the custodians (lecturers) of the policies are complicit in practicing academic dishonesty (Kasayira, et al., 2007). It is not only a

case of lecturers assisting female students as the students themselves write an assignment for their partners (Chireshe, 2014). Some lecturers' unfair assessment of students' work may push students to practice academic dishonesty (Tseakea, et al., 2021) as evidenced by giving different marks for the same work written by two or more students (Chireshe, 2014).

Zimba and Gasparyan noted that many students' forms of academic dishonesty are mostly plagiarism. The authors noted that students and other writers conduct the following ethical misconduct; "plagiarism of ideas, direct (verbatim) copying, paraphragiarism, text recycling, translational plagiarism, plagiarism of graphics, and plagiarism with citation manipulation, and compound plagiarism" (Zimba & Gasparyan, 2021, p. 134)

Increased use of technology in today's world of academia has led students to practice academic dishonesty such as the use of unauthorized material during an exam, the use of another student's work, and not properly referencing information (Sayed & Lento, 2015). Some students practice academic dishonesty by smuggling a cellular phone into the exam and texting a person outside the exam room for answers (Chen, Long, Liu, Wang, Wang, & Zhang, 2020). Another form of academic dishonesty that has recently surfaced especially in Zimbabwe is ghostwriting. This is whereby students subcontract someone to write an academic paper (assignment, thesis, dissertation) for a fee on their behalf and submit it as their own (Tseakea, et al., 2021). Whereas plagiarism may involve copying a text without consent, ghostwriting is done intentionally and willingly with ghostwriters writing a paper so that it can be attributed to another person (Bosch & Ross, 2012).

## **2.2 Reducing Prevalence of Academic Dishonesty**

Reducing or even stopping outrightly the prevalence of academic dishonesty is a challenge and many scholars have provided sound suggestions. Abel, et al. (2020) suggested that it may be advisable for institutions of higher learning to offer a compulsory academic ethics course to make students aware of academic dishonesty and how it may affect them. Universities may also engage external examiners (Kasayira, et al., 2007), change assessment methods, change 'banks of questions' frequently, strengthen internal quality assurance systems, and have seminars for

lecturers on academic dishonesty policies (Abel, et al., 2020). Although some researchers have called for the imposition of stiff penalties (Chireshe, 2014), making students aware of the policies and consequences, and that it is unethical to conduct (Chen, et al., 2020), students continue to practice it.

Academic dishonesty may be reduced by informing students of the extrinsic rewards or punishment open to them if they practice it. Locquiano and Ives (2020) proposed that it may help reduce incidences of academic dishonesty if students are made aware that practicing it may compromise their career prospects, affect their social standing, and result in time and money lost through studying and paying fees.

### **3.1 The Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this explanatory case study research design is to seek and get an understanding of the nature of current academic dishonesty practices at two universities as shared by recent graduate students and professional writers in two cities. The purpose is to explore their perceptions, worldviews, and beliefs about academic dishonesty at tertiary institutions. The explanatory case also sought to gain an insightful understanding and explanation of the uniqueness of the academic dishonesty practice. The following research questions have guided this explanatory case study research:

1. How and why do university students practice academic dishonesty during their studies?
2. What are the perceptions, worldviews, and beliefs that university students hold and have about academic dishonesty?

### **3.2 Methodology**

#### *3.2.1 Research Design*

This qualitative research study utilized an explanatory case study research design. This specific explanatory case study research design sought to answer the questions 'how' or 'why' with little control over the academic dishonesty practiced by the students. The explanatory case study research design has been used to gain new insights into academic dishonesty in institutions of learning in Zimbabwe's two

universities. I was interested in discovering new ideas and also in increasing new knowledge (Burns & Groove, 2001) of academic dishonesty.

Academic dishonesty in institutions of higher learning may affect the reputation of institutions. Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Maxwell, 2013) focusing on those students who admitted to having practiced academic dishonesty. “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for the study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton, 1990; 169). Using the explanatory case study research design, enabled the researcher to understand various types, examples, and reasons why students practice academic dishonesty.

### 3.2.2 Participants

Through the purposive sampling method, eight participants were selected (3 from each university and 2 writers from two cities). Participants consisted of two male writers, two male students, and four female students. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select students who engaged in academic dishonesty and also writers who have helped students practice it. At the time of data collection, the six students were fully registered by their respective universities. All eight participants willingly took part in the research study after they were informed that there would be no compensation for participating in the study. For their privacy and anonymity, pseudonyms were used to identify all the participants and their respective universities and cities they came from.

*Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants (n=8)*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Designation</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Level of study</i>
Sean	Male	41-45	Writer	City 1	Not specified
John	Male	35-40	Writer	City 2	Not specified
Charity	Female	31-35	Student	University 1	Bachelors
Adella	Female	31-35	Student	University 1	Bachelors
Brian	Male	36-40	Student	University 1	Bachelors
Chloe	Female	26-30	Student	University 2	Bachelors

Portia	Female	21-25	Student	University 2	Diploma
Ben	Male	31-35	Student	University 2	Bachelors

### *3.2.3 Data Collection*

After the completion of the consent form by the participants, data were collected mainly through interviews. In addition to the information provided on the consent form, the researcher also explained the nature and purpose of the study. Initially, a total of eight students agreed to participate. Two of the students discontinued partaking in the research process and subsequently, their recordings and transcripts were destroyed. The interviews done were to gather from the participants the nature, process, types, and reasons for engaging in academic dishonesty. Interviews were conducted mainly in the English language with some students responding in the local Shona language and resultantly translated into the English language.

### *3.2.4 Data Analysis*

The explanatory case study research design seeks to answer the question of how and why academic dishonesty happens, and what are the current forms of the practice. To answer these questions, I used the following steps in analyzing the data, popularly used in phenomenological data analysis. The idea was to search for patterns in the data transcripts to explain why the patterns exist (Bernard, 2013) and also at the same time draw meanings and relationships in the data explaining why and how students practice academic dishonesty. Hycner (1985) provided a detailed step-by-step qualitative analysis of data that has been adopted widely by other scholars. The process of data analysis was done except for the second stage.

- Transcription
- Bracketing and the phenomenological reduction
- Listening to the interview for a sense of the whole
- Delineating units of the general meaning
- Delineating units of meaning relevant to the research question
- Training independent judges to verify the units of relevant meaning
- Eliminating redundancies



- Clustering units of relevant meaning
  - Determining themes from clusters of meaning
  - Return to the participant with the summary and themes: Conducting a second interview
  - Modifying themes and summary
  - Identifying general and unique themes for all the interviews
  - Contextualization of themes
- Composite summary

In analyzing data, and going through the transcripts, I did not engage in bracketing as someone who has not practiced academic dishonesty knowingly. In coming up with the composite summary, I captured the relevant units that cut across the participants and came up with themes for all the interviews conducted.

#### **4.1 Findings**

The study investigated academic dishonesty practiced at two universities in two different towns. During the time of research, student participants were registered and currently studying at the respective two universities, writing their dissertations. All six participants stated that they had practiced academic dishonesty in many forms and for varied reasons. Of the six student participants, four of them stated that they practiced academic dishonesty on purpose while two stated that they did not do it on purpose.

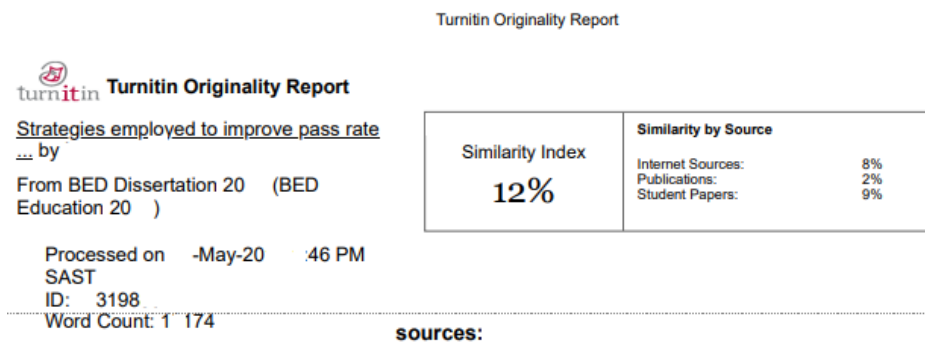
##### **4.1.1 Types of academic dishonesty**

###### *Manipulating the Plagiarism Check Percentage*

One of the most shocking findings from this study was the presence of an academic official at University 1 who helped students practice academic dishonesty. After having written their dissertation, the students are supposed to submit an electronic copy of the work, and then the report is sent directly to the academic affairs. Students stated that if the similarity index is high (above 30%, which is not accepted by the university), they would then ask someone within the university to fix that for them. The students said that they had never met the person, but would send a message to have the similarity index reduced to which

the person would ask the student to send money to a certain number and a copy of the dissertation. Adella and Brian admitted to having practiced academic dishonesty in this manner. At the time of writing, the total cost was US\$50. Adella had this to say:

*I did send my dissertation for an anti-plagiarism check and the similarity index was 54%. That is when I heard of this guy. I could not afford to fail, so I had to do it. Losing \$50 is nothing compared to failing the course*



*Picture 1: A screenshot of the reduced anti-plagiarism report*

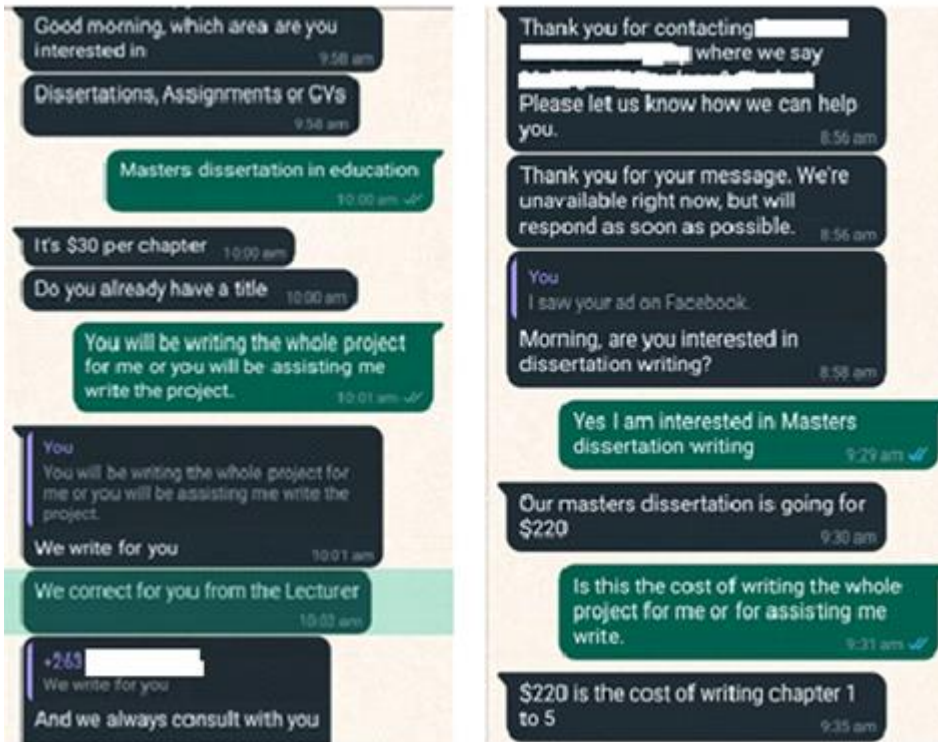
Adella stated that she knew other three students who had also paid the university official to have their similarity index for plagiarism reduced. After, sending the money, the students would normally wait for about three hours to receive the confirmation that the similarity index had been fixed. After getting the message, the students said that they would then send the dissertation via the official system and get the report that the similarity index was at an acceptable level.

The researcher asked for the cellphone number of the person within the university who did the practice but failed to reach out. The number was not reachable and could not process the Ecocash payment system. After having failed to reach him, Adella told me that the person keeps changing numbers for that particular purpose if he suspects that something is fishy.

### *Ghost-writing*

Another finding from the study was that students would ask professional writers to write for them and this form of academic dishonesty is called ghost writing. Charity from University 1 and Chloe and Portia from University 2 stated that they asked professional writers from town to write for them. This finding was from the two

writers and three students. The students stated that they asked someone to write for them because they were afraid to fail, so they wanted to make sure they got the best from the professional writers. They said that they obtained the contact details of the writers from friends and also from Facebook. Below is a screenshot Portia had with the said writers.



Picture 1: A screenshot showing the communication Portia had with the writers

As for the reasons why, she subcontracts writers to write on her behalf, Portia had this to say:

*I am just afraid to fail and that is why I ask someone to write my dissertation. I cannot say I am dull, but I just do it to make sure that I pass. Of course, I do read it and ask for clarification from the writer before I submit the work. Most students do it, so why not me?*

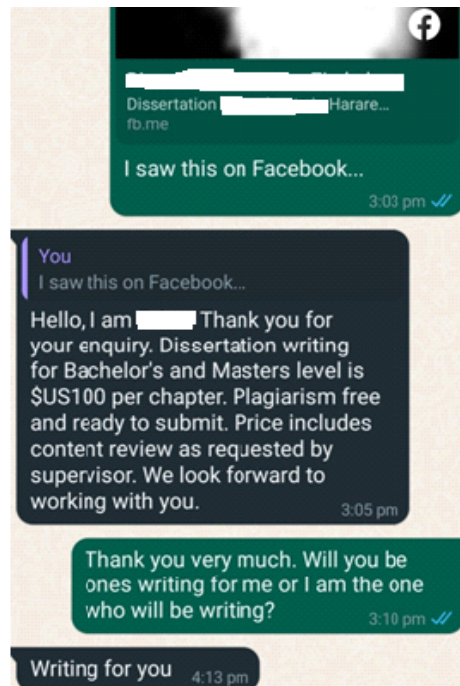
Portia went on to show me the communication she had with at least three professional writers (Picture 1, above, and Picture 2, below). Since companies were not part of the research process and were not contacted, possible identifiers have been redacted from the communication process. The advert posted its services that said they offer “support services and supervision” in the writing process that also included “Reducing

Turnitin index” among many others. But it is clear from the communication screenshots that the writers stated that they would be writing the dissertation themselves.

We are experienced dissertation consultants whose mandate is to make sure you pass your dissertation. We provide support services and supervision until you complete the final writeup. We assist with:

- ♥ Topic formulation
- ♥ Support services and supervision
- ♥ Conceptualising supervisor feedback
- ♥ Research Instruments
- ♥ Data collection
- ♥ Data analysis
- ♥ Reducing Turnitin index
- ♥ Editing and proofreading
- ♥ Defence preparation

As long as your question or problem concerns dissertations get in touch and be assured of passing.



Picture 2: A screenshot of services offered (to the left) by the companies and communication between Portia and the representative (to the right)

In addition to the communication messages that I got from the student participants, I managed to interview the two writer participants in the two cities, and they stated that they write for students for money. They stated that they could not find employment, and hence had to devise ways and means of survival, and ghost writing was a better alternative than, say engaging in criminal activities. The writers stated that there is no fixed charge for writing the dissertation, but that this depends on how they view the student. John had this to say about their operations:

*Normally the student brings a topic approved by their university. If we have a dissertation in our archives that is similar, I just work it out make changes, and give it to the student. It is business, my brother. I normally look at the dress of the student and try to 'measure' if s/he can pay handsomely. Some pay as high as US\$400 with some as little as US\$150.*

Sean stated that normally the charges have to do with the nature of the topic as some topics require a lot of work. He added that if there is a lot of explaining to the student

on the nature of the dissertation, then the cost will be high. These writers also have anti-plagiarism checks and ensure that their 'customers' pass with fewer problems.

### *Spousal Academic-based Dishonesty*

In addition to having a professional writer write for the student, another finding was that students would have their spouses write for them. This was the case with Chloe who admitted that her husband was an academic and would ask him to write an assignment on her behalf. The husband would write the paper the same way the professional writer would, and it would be the duty of the student to read and understand the paper written. The students also stated having someone write assignments for them increases the chances of them getting higher marks. Chloe reminisced:

*If my husband writes an assignment on my behalf, I normally get higher marks. If I write on my own, I normally get just above half. So, if my husband writes, it will be a bonus come exam time. It will be difficult to score high marks in the exam, but since my course work will be high it will be easy for me to pass the course.*

When asked if the spouse would not refuse to write the paper, Choe laughed and stated that he is the one paying for her tuition, so would not want her to fail the course because it would mean a loss of money and a waste of time.

### *Why Practice Academic Dishonesty?*

The study also investigated the reasons why students practice academic dishonesty in various forms. The students stated that they are adult learners who have many responsibilities and as such do not have the time to do all the work. They said they have personal as well as work-related responsibilities and as such it is just difficult for them to balance the workloads. Ben articulated how work, family, and school are taking a toll on him. He had this to say:

*I normally do not ask someone to write for me, but what I do is I go to an exam with a small paper written all the information I think would be in the exam. Some students call these papers CDs. I just do not have the time to prepare for my studies because of job demands and family.*

Another reason why students cheat is that they want to produce quality academic work thereby increasing the chances of passing the degree. The students said that they cheated or practiced academic dishonesty because they just wanted to pass and graduate with a good degree class. The need to produce quality work is also linked with the fact that the students stated that some of the modules they took were challenging such that producing quality work would be difficult for them. Hence, they would ask someone to write the assignments on their behalf so that they pass. Brian had this to say:

*Some of the modules are just difficult and asking someone knowledgeable on the subject area to write for you is the best. Some of the material will be new to me. Some lectures would not have covered all the areas of the module ... so it is challenging to produce good work.*

The students also stated that they are given too many assignments or work to do by their lecturers such that it was difficult for them to meet the due dates. They articulated that since some of them work full-time, they do not have enough time to do schoolwork.

Asked why the students ask writers to write for them, the writers said that the students are just too lazy to do the schoolwork. Sean said that the students have all the material, but are just lazy to do the work. He added that students want to be 'spoon-fed' and then reproduce what they would have been given by their lecturers. John added:

*These students have everything for them to produce quality work. I mean ... they have the Internet, free computers to do research, books, you name it. They have everything, but they prefer to have someone do it for them.*

The writers stated that they knew that writing for students was a bad practice, but said that they were doing it for the money. They said the economic situation in the country was dire and for them to survive they had to do it for the sake of their families.

#### *Flaws of Academic Dishonesty*

This is an interesting finding of this study because the flaws of academic dishonesty were articulated by the students who practiced it. I was fascinated by how they stated the flaws of academic dishonesty, yet they still practiced it. Below, are statements each of the students said on why practicing academic dishonesty is bad.

*From a Christian and academic point of view, it is just not right to claim other people's work as your own. It is like you steal from someone and say this is mine, yet you know you stole – Charity*

*When you have someone write for you and you graduate based on falsehoods, you may end up failing to do the work that you claim to know. You will fail to do work and this may give the university a bad reputation for churning out ineffective graduates – Chloe*

*The reputation of the university is affected and the university might fail to attract students in the future because it [university] will not be taken seriously. It will be disrespected – Ben.*

*If I lie that I am good at academics, whilst I know the work I produced is not mine; then I will not have the confidence to pursue further education. I would not have mastered the knowledge and hence cannot do advanced studies – Brian.*

*No new knowledge will be produced in academia as the work that is produced is redundant and belong to someone else -Adella.*

*The ranking of institutions of higher learning where academic dishonesty is rife may be lowered. That is just not right -Portia.*

## **5.1 Discussion**

The purpose of this explanatory case study research was to understand the perceptions, and worldviews of Bachelor students on their worldviews in the dissertation writing process about academic dishonesty. The students who participated in the study were drawn from two universities and the writers were drawn from two cities in Zimbabwe where these universities are located.

The major finding from this study is that there are many types of academic dishonesty being practiced by students, some of which tend to be new. Some forms of academic dishonesty seem to have been modified while some may be as a result of the use of technology. The variation and seemingly sophisticated strategies of practicing

academic dishonesty may point to inventiveness (Starovoytova & Arimi, 2017), riskiness attitude and whatever it takes attitude to get what they want. In light of this explanation, it is clear that students will continue to devise new methods to practice academic dishonesty.

The so-called professional writers who offer so many services in helping students write their dissertations are writing the projects themselves on behalf of the students. From this study, it is clear that ghostwriting is now prevalent in academia where writers are paid handsomely for their services. This finding supports the finding by Yadav and Rawal (2018) that ghostwriting is prevalent in the scientific world where big pharmaceutical companies fund ghostwriters to write a paper that is forwarded to a reputable journal to paint a positive picture of a drug. The key word is the issue of payment. Ghost writing is just viewed as dishonest, unethical, and unacceptable and hence must come to an end (Das & Das, 2014).

The study found that the ghostwriters attributed the nature of their business to the harsh economic climate prevailing in the country where they do not have jobs. The writers in this study argued that it is a matter of survival on their part rather than preserving the academic integrity of the students' institutions. Looking at the charges, (a maximum of close to US\$500 and a minimum of US\$150) in exchange for a written paper, is just unethical. The resultant qualification is for life, allowing a person to get employed, and purportedly qualified for the position. Sivasubramaniam, Kostelidou, and Ramachandran (2016) also reiterated that "unemployment issues for recent graduates who are well acquainted with the marking criteria, learning objectives, and outcomes" (p. 11) are the reason why ghostwriters are in this practice.

The finding by Yadav and Rawal (2018) is also commensurate with the findings of this study that while in pharmaceuticals, the drug's side effects are ignored, in this study knowledge innovation by the student is ignored. Through writing dissertations on behalf of the students, these professional writers are exacerbating academic dishonesty to the detriment of the student's future and also the economy in general. If this is happening at a large scale, then that means, universities are churning out 'pretenders' of the said professions who may lack the necessary prerequisite skills.



Another finding of this study was the availability of social media such as Facebook where ghostwriters advertise and communicate with potential clients. A WhatsApp communication tool that is available to students is used to communicate with 'clients.' The finding is corroborated by Sivasubramaniam, et al. (2016) who found that the availability of social networking plays to the advantage of the ghost writers who have seen the potential of these tools of communication to advertise and offer educational support. The current study found that ghost writers advertise their services on Facebook and communicate with their 'clients' on Facebook and WhatsApp.

A finding that is common from the students' side and the writers' side is the aspect of reducing the plagiarism index. So, if the writers, who write the dissertations for the students, are also capable of reducing the plagiarism index, there is a danger that one dissertation might be reproduced multiple times for different students at different universities and still obtain a good grade. Another disturbing finding is that a university official, employed, among other things to safeguard academic integrity, is the one who is responsible for academic dishonesty by reducing the plagiarism index for a fee. This means that the whole purpose of universities being creators of new knowledge is disregarded. Universities thus may become centers of reproducing old knowledge and presenting it as new under different names of students.

Previous research done by Sivasubramaniam, et al. (2016) found that ghost writers were also skilled in reducing the anti-plagiarism percentage index for their clients. Research studies done in the area have focused on how writers may ensure that plagiarism is reduced. Sivasubramaniam, et al. (2016) found that ghost writers would use "text matching detection software to reduce the [plagiarism] percentage matches" (p. 8). They specifically used the Turnitin anti-plagiarism tool to check for plagiarism.

The professional writers refused to disclose their professional qualifications and their real names. A question might be asked; if they are genuine and say they are doing the right thing as they say they are, why is it that they remain anonymous? The name of the writer redacted from the study is also fake, according to the student participants. Trying to get more personal information from them is difficult as they always respond that they provide the service and that their personalities and identities are not relevant.

Above all, the students shared various reasons why they believed academic dishonesty is bad and unethical. Although this was the case, they, continued to practice it, and the fear of being caught far outweighed the fear of failing the course. So, to the students, failing a course is not an option, but getting caught might be better. This finding is corroborated by Starovoytova and Arimi (2017) that failing a course is not an option because of external pressures, so any means necessary to pass will be employed by the students. In addition, students are not bothered about being caught cheating because the penalties for cheating might not be deterrent enough, hence the resultant effect of academic dishonesty.

It also seems like there is a mismatch between the reasons writers and students give why students ask someone to write dissertations for them. The writers believed the students were lazy while the students stated that they had so much on their plate (family, work, personal life), fear of failing, and a need to produce quality work. In supporting the students, Starovoytova and Arimi (2017) found that students blamed the lecturers' attitude to teaching which they argued was poor. Balancing academics and personal life seemed to be a challenge for the students in this particular study. So, a question might be asked; why study when you still have so much on your plate?

## **6.1 Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **6.1.1 Conclusion**

The results of the study have shown that dissertation-based academic dishonesty is rife at the two universities based on the responses of the participants who admittedly practiced it. The study has shown various ways the students practiced academic dishonesty, the flaws of their practice, and the reasons for practicing it.

The study has shown that the students did practice academic dishonesty at the penultimate stage of their studies. What is perplexing is that students in the study are aware of the flaws of academic dishonesty, but continued practicing it. The students gave various reasons for practicing academic dishonesty, with some taking the risk of getting caught. Ghost writing seems to have taken the world of academia by storm with unemployed professionals openly advertising and practicing it.

The problem of practicing academic dishonesty and letting it go will create a cycle, where those who cheated and did not get caught will also let their students cheat

because, to them, it is normal. It thus becomes an epidemic that will be common, contagious, and corrosive. Academic dishonesty is slowly becoming the culture being practiced at institutions of higher learning that if left unchecked, will result in the production of incompetent organizational and political leaders.

### **6.1.2 Recommendations**

Previous studies have shown that completely eradicating academic dishonesty is a futile exercise. What is needed is to come up with “a comprehensive, multilevel, systems-based approach” that is holistic in nature and aimed at reducing the academic dishonesty epidemic while creating a culture of integrity (Stephens, 2019). More research is needed to devise ways to prevent this cancerous disease from devouring academia.

1. It is the recommendation of this study that those found intentionally practicing academic dishonesty be punished severely and blacklisted in academia so that would-be offenders may be dissuaded from doing it.
2. Another recommendation this study may make is for those in academia to come up with a new way of assessing students instead of having them write dissertations. This suggestion is beyond the scope of this study, but a way of replacing the process of writing dissertations with something that is as legitimate as the dissertation must be devised the world over. Chances are that writing a dissertation, especially at the Bachelor level might not be as productive and sustainable as academic dishonesty is coming into play with the process. It is just disheartening to find that students are graduating pretending to own dissertations written by others.
3. University officials found aiding academic dishonesty in any capacity must be taken to task and made to account for their actions. Having a university official manipulate the plagiarism check percentage of a student’s work for a fee is just not right. Spouses who write dissertations and other assignments on behalf of their partners must be responsible enough, act ethically, and not help them.

## **7.1 Limitations**

This case study was limited to two universities in two cities targeting registered university students writing their dissertations. The study also was limited to two writers in two cities where the universities are located. Generalizing the results of this study might not be possible due to the small sample of the participants and also the number of universities represented. The study found that students at the two universities practice academic dishonesty and the ghostwriters wrote for their clients when in reality they claim to only assist. Future research needs to look at how technology can be used to stamp out academic dishonesty that has become so cancerous that it is devouring academia.

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