Chapter 2
Using ICTs to Check Plagiarism in PhD Research Works in Nigeria: Prospects and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of plagiarism in African universities has rationalized the adoption of various strategies to mitigate or eradicate it. In Nigeria particularly, computer-assisted approaches such as the Turnitin software have been appropriated to tackle this challenge. Many Nigerian universities have adopted Turnitin to ameliorate the quality of PhD research produced in their faculties. Although lauded in many quarters, this recourse to ICTs to check plagiarism has seen multiple challenges, some of which include poor anti-plagiarism policies, fallible anti-plagiarism software, and the Nigerian factor, among others. Using observations and secondary sources, this chapter critically explores these challenges. The chapter provides a conceptual definition of plagiarism and plagiarism detection systems; it shows how plagiarism is affecting PhD research in Nigerian universities and explores the place of ICTs in anti-plagiarism policies adopted by Nigerian universities. The chapter ends by examining the prospects and challenges of using ICTs to mitigate PhD student plagiarism in Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

It is an accepted premise that plagiarism is a serious threat to quality research. It has since been a highly intolerable tradition in the literary, political, entertainment, digital, and research community; and has thus given rise to multiple methodologies and movements aimed at mitigating or totally eradicating it. However, since the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web, plagiarism has proliferated to the extent of constituting a veritable plague in African universities. In effect, the proliferation of the new information and communication technologies has made original ideas increasingly rare, as most people tend to simply reproduce their contemporaries’ ideas, presenting them (these ideas) as their own. The Internet has thus facilitated the tradition by students of copying and pasting online material into their assignments or research works. Conscious of this sad reality, academic institutions and research bodies across the world have adopted various paradigms to check or sanction cases of plagiarism in their institutions. Most scientific journals around the world have, for instance, resorted to various technology-assisted approaches to check plagiarism in their research productivity.

In line with this ethicist movement, specific and very relevant software (notably Dupli Checker, PaperRater, Copyleak, Plagiarisma, Plagium, PlagScan, i-Theticate, i-Paradigm and Turnitin among others) are today deployed by most scientific journals, publishers, and other research institutions in the evaluation process of research papers submitted to them for review and publication. Similar trends occur in most universities where plagiarism software – particularly Turnitin – are increasingly popularised and deployed in the evaluation of school assignments and Master and PhD dissertations. New ICTs have thus, not only been one of the principal factors lying at the root of plagiarism; they have equally constituted a strategic tool to combat various forms of plagiarism in research works.

Like their counterparts from other parts of the world, Nigerian universities have, in recent times, embraced ICTs as an elixir of both student’s and lecturer’s plagiarism. In line with this, PhD theses produced in many Nigerian universities are, as a matter of principle, screened to check similarity index (for plagiarism check), with the use of computer software. Such ICT-assisted screening is a pre-requisite for the vetting and acceptance of students’ theses by universities. The similarity index check evidently follows the reasoned myth, which stipulates that the recrudescence of plagiarism in a given educational institution is liable to tarnish the reputation not only of the school, but equally of its products (students who graduate from it). Unchecked plagiarism across several institutions in a country has the potential to discredit a national education system (PlagiarismAdvice.org, 2014).

Despite these laudable efforts towards academic integrity, PhD student plagiarism continues to be a serious concern in many Nigerian universities; this, for reasons
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