



The epidemic of academic dishonesty in open and distance e-learning: a case study of a regional campus at Zimbabwe Open University

*Mercy Kurebwa¹ and Abigirl Lumbe²

¹Department of Educational Studies, Zimbabwe Open University, Zimbabwe.

²Department of Media & Journalism Studies, Zimbabwe Open University, Zimbabwe.

*Corresponding author: kurebwam@zou.ac.zw

Abstract

The objective of the study is to examine the occurrence of cheating in Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL), specifically during examinations and assignment writing. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of individuals' views on cheating in ODeL, a qualitative naturalistic research design was utilized. Participants for the study were selected using judgmental sampling technique and included twenty, (20) students, ten (10) lecturers and two (2) administrative staff at the Midlands Regional Campus. In-depth interviews were conducted with the chosen participants until saturation point was reached, enabling the researchers to gather detailed and insightful information. After data generation, thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes within the responses. Data were systematically organized and interpreted to uncover key ideas, concepts, and viewpoints related to cheating in ODeL. The study was informed by the Attribution Theory, which offers a framework for understanding the underlying reasons and motivations behind cheating behaviour. By employing this theory, the study gained insights on the factors influencing cheating behaviour in the context of ODeL. The study revealed a concerning prevalence of cheating in ODeL with a high occurrence of cheating in assignments. The study proposes a comprehensive approach to fostering academic integrity and reducing cheating in the ODeL programs at Midlands Regional Campus. Key recommendations include enforcing rigorous identity verification and severe penalties for cheating to deter misconduct, establishing comprehensive policies with regular monitoring, and cultivating a culture of academic honesty through workshops and student engagement. The study also suggests providing resources and affordable data access for marginalized students, as well as implementing and maintaining electronic security systems and proctoring tools to prevent cheating. By implementing this multifaceted approach, the study aims to uphold academic integrity, support student success, and significantly reduce cases of cheating in the ODeL programs.

Keywords: Open and Distance E-Learning (ODEL), Assessment, Cheating, Assignments and Examinations.

Introduction

The issue of academic dishonesty, particularly in the context of open and distance e-learning, has been a longstanding concern for educational institutions. Instances of cheating during assignments and examinations have been on the rise in universities, raising significant questions about the integrity of assessments. It is therefore essential to investigate the factors contributing to this problem to develop effective strategies that address the issue and promote academic honesty and integrity.

With the widespread adoption of online learning, the opportunities for students to engage in various forms of academic dishonesty have significantly increased. The Midlands Regional Campus of ZOU has observed a notable surge in incidents of cheating during assignments and examinations, which raises concerns about the institution's assessment processes and their integrity. This research paper sought to examine the specific case of Midlands Regional Campus of Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) and its experience with cheating within the context of

open and distance e-learning (ODeL). Understanding the factors that contribute to this widespread cheating is crucial for devising effective measures to combat such practices and uphold academic integrity.

As postulated by Diego (2017), cheating during examinations undermines the fundamental purpose of comprehending, applying, and generating ideas, as outlined in the revised Bloom's taxonomy. Such acts have a detrimental impact on the learning process. Additionally, research has demonstrated that cheating is like a disease as it can extend beyond the boundaries of the educational setting and can have negative implications for the entire nation (Staravoytova & Namango, 2016). Countries with a high prevalence of cheating often exhibit high levels of corruption. This highlights the far-reaching consequences of academic dishonesty. Concerted efforts are therefore necessary to deal with the scourge.

Unlike traditional face-to-face education, open and distance learning has learners who are geographically dispersed and largely independent which creates more room for cheating thereby presenting challenges in maintaining academic standards. The physical separation and limited face-to-face interaction between educators and learners make it more difficult to monitor and control any unethical practices. Inadequate support and guidance can unintentionally push students towards engaging in dishonest behaviour, (Diego, 2017). Cultivating a positive culture that ensures a promising future for the country is of utmost importance.

Statement of the Problem

Despite existing policies on cheating, the Midlands Regional Campus of Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) has experienced a significant increase in incidents of cheating during assignments and examinations within the context of Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL). This cheating pandemic raises concerns about the integrity of the institution's assessment processes and poses a threat to academic honesty and integrity. The shift towards online learning has provided students with increased opportunities to engage in various forms of academic dishonesty, exacerbating the problem. The physical separation

and limited face-to-face interaction between educators and learners in ODL present challenges to effectively monitor and promote academic integrity. Inadequate support and guidance may inadvertently contribute to students resorting to unethical practices.

Understanding the factors that contribute to this cheating problem is crucial for developing effective strategies and interventions to address the issue. By identifying the root causes and exploring the specific circumstances at the Midlands Regional Campus of ZOU, this research sought to shed light on the underlying factors and provide insights into the nature and extent of the cheating pandemic in ODeL. The study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on academic integrity in online education and provide recommendations for promoting a culture of honesty and integrity within the Midlands Regional Campus of ZOU and similar ODeL settings. The findings of this research will inform the development of targeted interventions and policies to mitigate cheating incidents and safeguard the credibility and quality of e-learning programs.

Research Objectives

- i) To examine the various methods and techniques employed by students to cheat in assignments and examinations within the context of Open and Distance Learning (ODeL).
- ii) To explore the underlying factors that contribute to assignment and examination cheating specifically in the Zimbabwe Open University's ODeL programs.
- iii) To propose effective strategies to mitigate assignment and examination cheating.

Research Questions

- i) How do students cheat in assignments and examinations in ODeL?
- ii) What are the underlying factors contributing to assignment and examination cheating in ODeL in the Zimbabwe Open University?

iii) What strategies can be adopted to mitigate assignment and examination cheating in ODeL programmes?

Review of Related Literature

This literature review critically analyzes the prevalence, causes, consequences, and potential interventions related to assignment and examination cheating in the context of Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL), with a specific focus on the Midlands Regional Campus of Zimbabwe Open University. By examining relevant research and scholarly articles, this review aims to provide valuable insights into the challenges associated with cheating in ODeL environments and proposes strategies to minimize this unethical behavior.

According to Sarita (2015), cheating in higher education is a growing concern globally. However, limited research has been conducted on assignment and examination cheating specifically in the context of ODeL, highlighting the need to explore the unique challenges and dynamics within this setting. This literature review aims to bridge this gap by examining existing research on assignment and examination cheating, with a specific emphasis on ODeL. Furthermore, the unique challenges faced by the Midlands Regional Campus of Zimbabwe Open University in relation to cheating necessitate a comprehensive examination of its causes and implications. By understanding the specific contributing factors within this setting, academic institutions and policymakers can develop targeted interventions and implement effective strategies to foster a culture of academic integrity and prevent cheating.

Research has it that one pivotal factor contributing to cheating in ODeL is technology. The easy accessibility of online resources such as pre-written assignments, answer keys, and essay-writing services increases the temptation for students to engage in cheating (Ravasco, 2012). While technology provides tools for monitoring and detecting cheating, it also facilitates unethical practices.

Furthermore, the absence of physical supervision in ODeL environments is another significant factor that promotes cheating. The lack of traditional methods of supervision can make students feel less accountable and more inclined to

exploit this situation. Research has demonstrated a positive correlation between the absence of in-person monitoring and an increase in cheating behavior. Additionally, the influence of peer culture and social norms is another important aspect to consider as studies have revealed a link between the prevalence of cheating and a culture that normalizes such behavior, (Zhao et al., 2012).

Academic pressure and competition are also contributory factors to cheating behaviors in ODeL. Students may resort to dishonest practices to cope with the pressure for higher grades and the fear of academic failure.

Cheating

According to Tippens, (2006), cheating can be defined as engaging in activities that undermine the integrity of tests or assessments to obtain unfair advantages leading to scores that do not accurately reflect an individual's true abilities.

It involves obtaining scores through prohibited means, undermining the validity of assessments, and giving credit for work that is not one's own (Iievens & Burke, 2003). Cheating can have long-term consequences, extending beyond academic settings and potentially affecting other areas of life, such as work and family (Cizek, 2003). This behavior not only harms the cheaters themselves but also other innocent beings who may be impacted by the actions (Cizek, 2003).

Cheating can negatively impact the original owners or creators of work, particularly in cases of plagiarism, where intellectual property rights, recognition, and potential income may be lost (Cizek, 2003). The prevalence of cheating has been amplified by technology, especially in the context of online education, where academic dishonesty is more prevalent compared to traditional classes (Lanier, 2006). Students who attend both traditional and online classes are more likely to cheat in online tests as compared to traditional tests, (Miller, 2013). The availability of cheating devices has further facilitated cheating with others now taking cheating as a profession where students go and access assignment writing services. There are websites available that advertise 'super good undetectable cheating gadgets' (McCollum, 1996; Whitley, 1998; Kenas, 2021).

Technological advancements have made cheating easier for students and more challenging for educators to detect, contributing to the commercialization of cheating practices (Shalevisks, 2021). The decline in public morality, influenced in part by easy accessibility of information through technology, has also been attributed to the high levels of cheating among contemporary students (Fass, 1990). Despite the presence of university policies addressing cheating, it continues to persist (Whitley, 1998).

In order to uphold academic discipline and integrity, it is crucial to educate students about the importance of honesty and academic integrity, emphasizing the implications for their future lives (Tippens, 2006). Efforts to combat the cheating pandemic should focus on understanding the factors contributing to the cheating behaviour which will in turn help implement effective measures to mitigate the problem.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity, as defined by Norris, and Kuhlmeier (2021), encompasses values such as honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. These values are crucial in the context of Open and Distance Education (ODEL), where attributes like originality, fairness, honesty, collaboration, respect for intellectual property, and responsible use of technology play a significant role (Fishman, 2014; Holden, Norris, & Kuhlmeier, 2021).

Regarding originality, students must strive to produce own work that reflects own thoughts and ideas. By emphasizing originality, students learn to respect intellectual property rights and obtain necessary permissions when utilizing others' work. Honesty requires students to accurately present their work while acknowledging all sources of information they would have used. Fairness is an important attribute and involves providing equal opportunities to all students eliminating chances that could give certain students an unfair advantage. When it comes to assessments, it is crucial that all students start from an equal position and receive sufficient guidance from their instructors before undertaking assignments and examinations. Insufficient guidance by educators can increase the likelihood

of students feeling pressured to cheat, particularly in ODeL, where they are on their own most of the time and challenges related to access to resources, academic support and guidance arise as a result of geographical constraints (Diego, 2017).

Responsibility and integrity in ODeL also extend to the proper and ethical use of technology, which plays an integral role in the learning environment. Students must utilize technology in ways that uphold academic standards and ethical practices. Irresponsible use of technology can contribute to online misconduct and cheating.

The absence of personal connections and limited supervision in ODeL settings may diminish the establishment of trust and relationships among students, potentially tempting them to cheat without fear of social consequences or repercussions. Some of the students in ODeL graduate without having met physically with fellow students which takes away the aspect of personal connections. Addressing these unique challenges posed by ODeL is crucial in maintaining academic integrity in e-learning environments (Holden, Norris, & Kuhlmeier, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Attribution Theory

The study is underpinned by Harold Kelly's attribution theory. Attribution is a cognitive process that involves connecting an event to its cause and helps to explain the reasons behind various individual behaviours and decisions. Thus, for this study there was need to explain why students engage in cheating practices in assignments and examinations. By applying this theory the study gained insights into the specific attributions made by students regarding their cheating behaviour. In the case of assignment and examination cheating, attribution theory can be applied in the following ways:

In terms of attribution of responsibility, students may attribute their cheating behavior to external factors like high academic pressure or a belief that cheating is common among peers. On the other hand, observers, such as lecturers or invigilators, may attribute cheating to internal factors like lack of integrity or personal values.

The stability of attribution examines whether cheating behavior is seen as a stable or variable characteristic. If cheating is attributed to stable internal factors, observers may view the individual as more likely to cheat in the future. Conversely, if it is attributed to variable external factors, cheating may be perceived as less likely to recur.

The controllability of attribution considers whether cheating behavior is seen as within an individual's control or beyond their control. Students may attribute cheating to external factors beyond their control, such as academic pressure. Observers, on the other hand, may attribute cheating behavior to factors within the individual's control, such as personal choices or ethical decision-making.

By applying attribution theory, researchers gained insights into how individuals perceive and attribute reasons for engaging in cheating behavior in ODeL. This understanding facilitates the development of interventions and strategies to address cheating by targeting specific attributions and influencing perceptions of responsibility, stability, and controllability of cheating behavior.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was employed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the assignment and examination cheating pandemic in online distance education (ODeL) at Zimbabwe Open University. The study population included twenty (20) students, ten (10) lecturers and two (2) administrative staff who have experience with academic misconduct cases in ODeL. To ensure a diverse range of perspectives, judgmental sampling technique was used to select participants with experiences in ODeL processes. The data collection process included in-depth interviews with individual participants to capture their unique perspectives, experiences, and insights on cheating. In depth interviews allowed for a rich exploration of the topic. This allowed the researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of existing measures and approaches used to address cheating in the institution. The qualitative data collected from interviews, were transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding. This analytical approach helped

identify common themes, patterns, and underlying factors related to cheating practices in ODeL. Overall, this qualitative research methodology provided valuable insights into the complexities of cheating practices in ODeL and can inform the development of effective measures to promote academic integrity in the institution.

Findings and Discussion

As revealed by the study, cheating behavior among learners can be influenced by various factors classified as individual, institutional, technological, and situational factors. Individual factors play a significant role in shaping student behavior towards academic integrity. A lack of motivation or interest in a particular course, as highlighted by McCabe (2001), can significantly increase the likelihood of cheating. This resonates with the broader understanding that students who are not engaged or invested in their learning are more likely to seek shortcuts (McCabe, 2001). Furthermore, poor time management skills, often resulting in missed deadlines, can create a sense of pressure that drives some students to cheat (Ellis, 2006). This pressure is often compounded by a lack of confidence in one's academic abilities, leading students to believe that cheating is the only way to succeed (Jordan, 2010). Additionally, the social dynamics of the learning environment, particularly peer pressure to succeed, can create a culture where cheating is seen as acceptable or even necessary (Stone, 2001). This pressure to conform to peer norms can be particularly potent in situations where students feel the need to meet high expectations or gain an advantage over their peers.

Beyond individual motivations, institutional factors play a crucial role in shaping a culture of academic integrity. Inadequate academic support and resources, particularly a lack of clear guidance and orientation for students, can create an environment where cheating thrives. As noted by (Bertram Gallant, 2008), when students are unsure of expectations or lack access to the support needed to succeed, they may be more likely to view cheating as a viable option. This is particularly relevant in ODeL contexts, where the physical distance from instructors and support services can exacerbate feelings of isolation and confusion. Furthermore, limited

access to essential resources, such as textbooks, computers, and reliable internet access, can create significant barriers to learning and increase the temptation to cheat (Bates, 2019). This disparity in access, can disproportionately impact students from disadvantaged backgrounds, further highlighting the ethical imperative of addressing these institutional shortcomings (Guthrie & Wiles, 2005).

While technology offers incredible opportunities for learning, it also presents new challenges to academic integrity. The ease with which information can be accessed, copied, and shared online has undoubtedly contributed to the rise of plagiarism and other forms of technologically enabled cheating (Engler et al., 2008). Insufficient control and security measures on online platforms, coupled with the limitations of plagiarism detection software, further exacerbate these challenges (Lancaster & Culwin, 2004). Moreover, as Wanga and Wanga (2022) argue, the commercialization of cheating, with websites offering readily available essays and exam answers, has created a thriving industry that undermines academic integrity. Addressing these technological challenges requires a multi-pronged approach, including robust online proctoring, comprehensive digital literacy programs for both students and faculty, and ongoing critical engagement with the ethical implications of technology in education.

The study further revealed that beyond individual and institutional contexts, situational factors can create pressures that increase the likelihood of cheating. High workloads, competing priorities, and limited time for assignment completion are common stressors for students, particularly in ODeL environments where learners often juggle multiple roles and responsibilities (Ayeni, 2012). The lack of face-to-face interaction, while offering flexibility, can also reduce social control and accountability, potentially increasing the temptation to cheat (Mayhew et al., 2000). Institutions must recognize these pressures and provide students with the support and flexibility they need to succeed academically without compromising their integrity. This includes promoting realistic workload expectations, offering flexible

assignment deadlines when appropriate, and fostering a sense of community and support among online learners.

Forms of cheating

The study revealed a concerning prevalence of various forms of cheating among ODeL students. As in other contexts, plagiarism emerged as the most common form, facilitated by the ease of copying and pasting information from the internet (Engler et al., 2008). Lecturers expressed significant concern over students' heavy reliance on readily available material without proper attribution, highlighting a potential lack of understanding regarding ethical research practices. This finding aligns with (Mayhew et al., 2000) who found that students often underestimate the seriousness of plagiarism, viewing it as a victimless crime.

Unauthorized use of materials during exams was also prevalent, with students resorting to creative methods of concealment, such as writing notes on unconventional surfaces. These findings echo (Bertram Gallant, 2008) who argue that the physical separation inherent in ODeL can create opportunities for rule-breaking that would be less likely in traditional face-to-face settings.

Impersonation, a particularly concerning form of cheating, was also identified. The anonymity afforded by distance learning environments can make it challenging to verify student identities, creating opportunities for fraudulent exam-taking (Grijalva et al., 2007). The case of a son attempting to write an exam on behalf of his mother underscores the lengths to which some individuals will go to gain an unfair advantage.

Furthermore, the study uncovered instances of students sharing login credentials to allow others to complete assignments on their behalf, highlighting the ease with which technology can be used to facilitate cheating. This finding aligns with the broader trend of contract cheating, where students outsource their academic work to third-party individuals or companies (Lancaster & Culwin, 2004).

Collusion, both with fellow students and external sources, emerged as another prevalent

form of cheating. The discovery of an entire class submitting identical assignments points to a potential normalization of dishonest behavior within certain groups. This finding underscores the importance of fostering a culture of academic integrity within the ODeL environment, where traditional classroom norms may be less influential (Stone, 2001).

The use of technology to gain an unfair advantage was widespread, with students employing various methods, such as hiding notes on electronic devices and accessing internet resources during exams. This finding aligns with (Bates, 2019) who argue that as technology becomes increasingly integrated into education, so too do the opportunities for technologically-enabled cheating.

Factors that contribute to cheating in ODeL.

This study confirms that many ODeL students face significant time constraints due to multiple roles and responsibilities, echoing findings from (Ayeni, 2012) and (Bates, 2019). Juggling work, family, and other commitments can make it extremely challenging for students to dedicate sufficient time and effort to their studies. As one student poignantly articulated, the pressure to meet deadlines amidst these competing demands often leads to "taking shortcuts" and compromising academic integrity. This finding aligns with (Ellis, 2006) who found that poor time management skills, often exacerbated by a lack of institutional support, are a significant contributing factor to academic dishonesty. However, it is important to note that while time constraints are a valid concern, they should not be viewed as an excuse for cheating. Institutions must provide adequate support and resources to help students manage their time effectively, while also emphasizing the importance of academic integrity.

The study also highlights the immense pressure to perform well and the fear of failure as driving forces behind cheating behaviors. Students spoke of safeguarding their reputations and avoiding the shame of disappointing family members. This finding resonates with (Jordan, 2010) who found that students with low self-efficacy and high levels of academic anxiety are more likely to cheat as a way of coping with these

pressures. However, while the competitive academic environment can undoubtedly contribute to anxiety and a fear of failure, it's crucial to foster a culture where learning and academic growths are valued over simply achieving high grades. Institutions should consider implementing support systems that address student anxiety and promote a growth mindset, emphasizing the importance of effort and perseverance over shortcuts.

The study further revealed a concerning disparity in access to resources and support, particularly for marginalized students from rural areas. Limited access to internet facilities, library resources, and tutorials places these students at a significant disadvantage, increasing the pressure to cheat. This finding aligns with (Guthrie & Wiles, 2005) who argue that the "digital divide" exacerbates existing inequalities in education. It's imperative for institutions to address these disparities by providing equitable access to technology, resources, and support services. This may involve offering financial assistance for internet access, providing offline learning materials, and ensuring that tutorials and support are accessible to students regardless of their location.

While this study provides valuable insights into the factors contributing to cheating behaviors among ODeL students at the Zimbabwe Open University, it is important to acknowledge that these factors are complex and interconnected. Time constraints, pressure to perform, and lack of support do not operate in isolation but rather create a perfect storm that can make cheating seem like a viable option. Addressing this multifaceted challenge requires a holistic approach that combines individual support for students with institutional-level changes that promote academic integrity and create a more equitable learning environment for all.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that there are several significant factors that contribute to cheating behavior among students in online and distance e-learning (ODeL) programs. These factors include poor time management, lack of support and guidance,

pressure to perform well, limited resources, and multiple responsibilities.

Firstly, poor time management skills among students create difficulties in meeting deadlines for assignments and other academic tasks. The inability to effectively manage time and balance multiple responsibilities result in students resorting to shortcuts thereby compromising their work. Poor time management ultimately increasing the likelihood of engaging in cheating behaviours.

Secondly, the pressure to perform well and the fear of failure play a significant role in driving students to cheat. The competitive nature of the academic environment, coupled with the desire to maintain a good academic standing, creates a strong incentive for students to engage in dishonest practices to avoid negative consequences and achieve desired outcomes.

Moreover, limited resources and marginalization contribute to the temptation to cheat as students are thrown and left in the dip end without support and guidance. Lack of adequate resources create pressure pushing students towards cheating so as to cope.

The study also highlights the impact of multiple responsibilities on cheating behavior. Students who juggle various roles as employees, parents, and students find it overwhelming to fulfil all the obligations.

It is imperative for educational institutions to take these findings into consideration and develop proactive measures to address and mitigate cheating in ODeL programs. Strategies such as promoting effective time management skills, providing support and resources to marginalized students, implementing academic integrity policies, and offering counselling or academic support services can help create an environment that discourages cheating and promotes ethical academic practices.

In conclusion, the study underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing the contributing factors to cheating in ODeL programs. By addressing the problem of poor time management, alleviating performance pressures, improving resource accessibility, support and

guidance to students' educational institutions can foster a culture of academic integrity and enhance the overall learning experience for students in distance and e-learning (ODeL) environments.

Recommendations

The study recommends several measures to address the issue of cheating in the context of ODeL at Midlands Regional Campus of Zimbabwe Open University:

Implementation of valid identification and strict punishment:

Enforce rigorous identity verification measures to reduce cases of impersonation.

Establish and enforce severe penalties for students found at the wrong side of the fence so as to create a deterrent against cheating behaviors and ensuring accountability.

Development and implementation of policies:

Establish comprehensive policies and guidelines specifically focused on academic integrity and cheating prevention.

Regularly assess and monitor adherence to these policies to ensure compliance and enforce corrective measures where necessary.

Educational interventions:

Run workshops and seminars to cultivate a culture of academic honesty and integrity in ODeL.

Engage students in discussions and activities that enhance their understanding and importance of academic integrity principles.

Provision of guidance and support:

Provision of necessary resources to marginalized ODeL students particularly those in the rural areas where most Midlands students come from. For example, establishing fully equipped District Centres in the rural areas where students can come and get service.

Liaise with network providers for more affordable data for students to help them access online learning platforms, such as E-bray and virtual tutorials.

Development of electronic security systems:

Install electronic security systems and proctoring tools, to deter cheating.

Regular updates and maintenance of electronic systems to ensure their effectiveness.

By implementing these recommendations, the study aims to foster an environment that upholds academic integrity, supports student success, and reduce cases of cheating in the ODeL programmes at Midlands Regional Campus of Zimbabwe Open University.

ORCID

Kurebwa M - <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9887-9809>

Lumbe A - <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5174-4442>

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