

INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES AND ETHICAL RESEARCH CULTURE AS STRATEGIES FOR CURBING PLAGIARISM IN UNIVERSITIES IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigated institutional policies and ethical research culture as strategies for curbing plagiarism in universities in Rivers State, Nigeria. Two research questions and two corresponding hypotheses guided the study. A descriptive survey research design was adopted. The population comprised 840 respondents drawn from three public universities in Rivers State, including academic staff, postgraduate students, and administrative staff. A sample size of 270 respondents was selected using a stratified random sampling technique. Data were collected using a self-structured instrument titled Institutional Policies and Ethical Research Culture Questionnaire (IPERCQ), organized into clearly defined sections and structured on a four-point Likert scale. The reliability of the instrument was established using the Cronbach Alpha method, which yielded a coefficient of 0.85, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while t-test was employed to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that formal plagiarism policies, research orientation programmes, supervisory mentoring, and plagiarism detection software were firmly established and effectively implemented within the institutions studied. The study further found that ethical research culture strengthened institutional efforts through shared accountability, academic honesty, and integrity-driven supervision. The findings demonstrated that sustainable control of plagiarism depends on the interaction between clearly articulated institutional regulations and ethical academic practices. Consequently, the study recommended periodic review of plagiarism policies, mandatory research integrity training, inclusion of plagiarism detection reports in thesis and dissertation submissions, regulation of supervisory workloads, and strengthened inter-university collaboration on academic integrity management. The study concluded that effective plagiarism prevention requires both strong institutional frameworks and a deeply embedded culture of ethical scholarship in public universities in Rivers State.

Keywords: Institutional policies, ethical research culture, plagiarism management, academic integrity

Introduction

University systems across the world stand on a fragile, but powerful foundation and trust in the integrity of knowledge they produce. The university is not merely a teaching institution; it is a site of verification, critique, and intellectual accountability. When that trust is weakened, the credibility of degrees, publications, and research claims begins to erode. University research environment has undergone profound transformation over the past decade, shaped by exponential growth in research output and unprecedented digital access to scholarly resources. As universities expand their research portfolios, issues of academic integrity have simultaneously intensified, prompting global concern over the integrity of scholarly work and the credibility of higher education systems. In this era of digital scholarship, plagiarism has emerged as a pervasive form of academic dishonesty, threatening to undermine research credibility, erode public trust, and weaken institutional reputation within and across national borders Adeyemi & Musa (2021). Plagiarism once constrained by limited access to texts now proliferates in part due to the digital abundance of information

and the ease of text replication, challenging universities to develop sophisticated institutional responses that safeguard research quality while upholding ethical norms.

Plagiarism involves the misappropriation of intellectual property and the misrepresentation of original ideas as one's own. Literature have defined plagiarism not merely as verbatim copying, but as a spectrum of unethical research practices that distort scholarly contributions and compromise ethical standards (Turner, 2019). In practical terms, plagiarism undermines the foundational principles of research, including originality, transparency, and accountability, and it corrodes the very purpose of academic inquiry: the production of new and credible knowledge. Drawing from the Nigerian higher education context, Okoro (2022) conceptualizes plagiarism as both a behavioural and systemic issue, rooted in inadequate ethical socialization, weak enforcement of policy frameworks, and limited research awareness among scholars in tertiary institutions. These definitions highlight that plagiarism is neither a trivial nor isolated concern, but a structural challenge that implicates institutional culture, policy efficacy, and academic leadership. Within Nigerian universities, the rising visibility of plagiarism cases has provoked intense academic debate. Studies suggests that institutions with well-defined policies and comprehensive research cultures exhibit lower incidences of academic misconduct, whereas universities lacking effective ethical frameworks struggle to deter plagiarism effectively Abdulazeed & Egun (2023). The emphasis on publication output for career progression has heightened pressures on academics and postgraduate scholars, inadvertently incentivizing shortcuts and unethical research practices when institutional safeguards are inadequate. This phenomenon is not unique to Nigeria, the Nigerian system faces distinct challenges, including uneven policy implementation, limited research integrity training, and emerging digital literacies that outpace regulatory frameworks.

In the context of Rivers State, public universities contribute significantly to national research outputs, concerns about academic integrity persist. Anecdotal reports and institutional audits in Rivers State reveal recurring patterns of unacknowledged textual replication and weak enforcement of ethical research standards among academics and graduate researchers. Such trends amplify the risk of reputational damage and diminish public confidence in academic qualifications awarded by these institutions. These observable realities contrast sharply with the normative expectations of ethical research conduct as articulated in university statutes and national quality assurance frameworks. Institutional policies formal rules, guidelines, and sanctions designed to regulate academic conduct are widely recognized as central to countering plagiarism. According to Aluko (2019), effective policies clearly define unethical research behaviours, outline procedures for detection and adjudication, and delineate sanctions that reflect the gravity of misconduct. However, policies alone are insufficient if they remain dormant on paper. A vibrant ethical research culture one in which values such as honesty, respect for intellectual property, and mutual accountability are embedded in everyday academic practice is equally essential. International and Nigerian research ethics scholarship emphasizes that policies must be coupled with normative cultural commitments to ethical conduct if plagiarism is to be meaningfully mitigated (Rodriguez & Lee 2022; Eze 2023).

In practice, this involves sustained training, mentorship, peer accountability mechanisms, and visible leadership commitment to research integrity. In public universities, the institutional ability to translate policy into practice is often challenged by bureaucratic inertia, resource constraints, and competing administrative priorities. Consequently, the mere presence of anti-plagiarism policies does not automatically engender compliance; it is the intersection of policy clarity, institutional functionality, and proactive leadership that determines the quality of responses to research misconduct. Universities can effectively curb plagiarism by implementing clear academic integrity policies that define plagiarism, establish

guidelines for proper citation and scholarly conduct, and prescribe appropriate sanctions for violations. Simultaneously, fostering an ethical research culture that promotes honesty, originality, accountability, and respect for intellectual property encourages students and researchers to uphold ethical standards in all scholarly activities. Bretag (2016), a strong combination of institutional regulations and a culture of academic integrity plays a critical role in preventing plagiarism and promoting responsible research practices within higher education institutions.

Plagiarism concerns the appropriation of intellectual output without appropriate acknowledgment. Yet this definition conceals substantial conceptual debate. Internationally, Eaton (2021) defines plagiarism as a breach of academic integrity involving the presentation of another's ideas, words, data, or creative expressions as one's own, regardless of intent. This definition foregrounds the epistemic harm done to scholarly attribution systems and frames plagiarism within integrity governance structures. It reflects a regulatory and institutional orientation, emphasizing accountability within formal academic systems. Adebayo (2020), writing from the Nigerian higher education context, conceptualizes plagiarism as both an ethical infraction and a systemic outcome of weak scholarly socialization, inadequate mentoring, and instrumental academic cultures. plagiarism is not only an act of copying but a manifestation of deficits in academic writing training, research ethics internalization, and institutional enforcement mechanisms. This definition reflects a practical and developmental orientation, emphasizing capacity building and structural reform rather than solely punitive control. The distinction between these perspectives is significant. The Nigerian Intellectual positioning introduces contextual pressures such as promotion policies tied to publication counts, limited access to plagiarism detection tools, and uneven enforcement in public universities. This illustrate that plagiarism is simultaneously an ethical violation, a governance issue, and a pedagogical concern. Importantly, plagiarism must be distinguished from related constructs. It differs from poor citation practice, which may reflect inadequate referencing competence rather than deliberate misrepresentation. It also differs from copyright infringement, which is a legal violation concerned with intellectual property law rather than academic attribution norms Macfarlane et al., (2019). Academic dishonesty is a broader umbrella construct that includes cheating in examinations and falsification of data, whereas plagiarism specifically concerns misattributed authorship.

Plagiarism has re-emerged in contemporary higher education as a complex, multi-layered phenomenon that extends beyond the conventional understanding of copying another person's work. In public university systems, particularly within developing contexts such as Nigeria, concerns about plagiarism now intersect with issues of research integrity, institutional credibility, academic ranking, and global knowledge production. What was once largely framed as individual academic misconduct has become entangled with digital infrastructures, commercial writing services, and algorithmic text generation tools. The literature increasingly treats plagiarism not simply as rule violation but as a structural and cultural challenge shaped by technological transformation, institutional governance, and pedagogical practice Bretag et al., (2019).

Historically, plagiarism in universities involved direct copying of printed texts, unattributed paraphrasing, or replication of assignments. These traditional forms remain present, but digital technologies have expanded both opportunity and complexity. The availability of online repositories, preprint servers, and academic databases has facilitated speedily access to scholarly content, increasing the ease with which text can be reproduced. At the same time, plagiarism detection software has become embedded within university quality assurance systems, establishing a continuous cycle between rule evasion and institutional oversight Bretag et al., (2019). Technology-mediated plagiarism now includes practices such as algorithm-assisted paraphrasing, and digital ghostwriting services. These

forms complicate detection because textual similarity may be masked through superficial rewording. Recent literature suggests that digital transformation has shifted the issue from mere copying to more sophisticated authorship displacement, where the boundary between assistance and substitution becomes blurred Eaton, (2021). In Nigerian public universities, uneven digital literacy and limited institutional infrastructure create asymmetries. While students may access online content and commercial writing platforms, institutional mechanisms for detection and prevention are not uniformly detailed Okoro and Chukwudi, (2021). The digital environment therefore amplifies existing structural vulnerabilities.

Self-plagiarism refers to the reuse of one's previously published or submitted work without proper disclosure. Although the material originates from the same author, the ethical concern arises from misrepresentation of originality and potential distortion of academic productivity metrics. Internationally, self-plagiarism is debated. Some scholars argue that knowledge is cumulative and that recycling elements of prior work may be legitimate when transparently acknowledged. Others contend that undisclosed duplication undermines research evaluation systems, particularly where publication counts inform promotion and funding decisions Horbach and Halffman, (2019). In Nigerian public universities, where academic advancement often depends heavily on publication volume, self-plagiarism intersects with performance pressures. The issue is less about intellectual theft and more about integrity in scholarly reporting. Conceptually, self-plagiarism differs from text recycling that is properly cited. Patchwriting involves weaving phrases or structures from source material into one's own writing with minimal transformation. Unlike deliberate copying, patchwriting is often associated with developing writers who lack confidence in paraphrasing academic discourse. Recent scholarship treats patchwriting as a developmental stage rather than unequivocal misconduct, particularly among postgraduate students navigating unfamiliar scholarly conventions Eaton, (2021). This interpretation is particularly relevant in multilingual contexts such as Nigeria, where students may struggle with academic English conventions. Conceptually, patchwriting occupies a grey zone between plagiarism and inadequate writing competence. The literature increasingly recommends pedagogical interventions rather than purely punitive responses.

The digital era has altered not only the methods of plagiarism but its conceptual boundaries. The proliferation of technological writing tools introduces ambiguity regarding authorship, originality, and assistance. The literature increasingly emphasizes the need to reconceptualize plagiarism within a broader framework of authorship transparency and integrity governance Eaton, (2021). Digital infrastructures have also institutionalized surveillance through plagiarism detection software integrated into learning management systems. While these tools enhance detection, critics argue that overreliance on similarity indices risks reducing academic judgment to numerical thresholds Horbach and Halffman, (2019). In resource-constrained public universities, inconsistent access to such tools may widen integrity gaps across institutions. The digital transformation therefore produces a paradox. It democratizes access to knowledge while simultaneously destabilizing traditional norms of authorship. The conceptual linkage between technology-mediated forms, institutional policy, and ethical research culture becomes central. Plagiarism is no longer a purely individual moral lapse; it is embedded in technological ecosystems and institutional governance structures.

Academic integrity has traditionally been framed as adherence to principles such as honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage within scholarly work. However, contemporary scholarship extends this moral framing to institutional responsibility. From a Nigerian higher education perspective, Okeke and Salihu (2022) conceptualize institutional policies on academic integrity as formally codified guidelines developed by universities to regulate scholarly conduct, prevent academic misconduct, and define institutional responses

to violations within teaching, research, and assessment processes. Bretag et al (2021), who define institutional academic integrity policies as comprehensive governance instruments that articulate standards of scholarly behavior, delineate investigative procedures, and embed preventive education within institutional systems to cultivate an integrity-oriented academic culture. This definition foregrounds prevention and cultural transformation rather than merely punitive regulation. Institutional policies on academic integrity must be distinguished from general codes of conduct. While codes of conduct articulate broad ethical principles applicable to university members, academic integrity policies are more specific, addressing scholarly production, authorship norms, plagiarism, data fabrication, examination malpractice, and research misconduct. They often include procedural steps for investigation, adjudication, and appeal, thereby operationalizing ethical expectations within structured governance systems.

Institutional policies refer broadly to formally adopted rules, guidelines, and procedures that govern organizational operations. In the university context, these policies regulate academic programs, research practices, staff conduct, student assessment, and administrative processes. Within governance literature, institutional policies are viewed as instruments of organizational coordination and accountability. Ogunode and Ijeoma (2023) argue that institutional policies in Nigerian public universities serve as regulatory anchors that translate national education laws and accreditation requirements into operational standards. They stress that policies function as mechanisms for internal control, ensuring alignment with oversight bodies and promoting transparency in institutional decision-making. Tierney and Lanford (2021) interpret institutional policies as strategic governance tools that mediate between institutional autonomy and regulatory compliance, shaping how universities manage risk, accountability, and stakeholder trust. Literature define institutional policies are neither static documents nor symbolic declarations; rather, they are active governance frameworks shaping institutional behavior. Within the domain of academic integrity, such policies specify definitions of misconduct, procedural safeguards, sanctions, and preventive strategies. The effectiveness of these policies depends not merely on their existence but on clarity, accessibility, internal coherence, and alignment with institutional mission.

Regulatory frameworks refer to the encompassing legal and administrative structures within which institutional policies operate. They provide external standards that shape internal governance practices. In Nigeria, public universities operate under statutory frameworks that include national university commissions, accreditation bodies, and federal education laws. These frameworks influence how academic integrity policies are structured and enforced. Akinwale and Musa (2021) explain that regulatory frameworks in higher education function as compliance architectures that ensure universities meet nationally prescribed academic standards and ethical expectations. They emphasize that weak alignment between national regulations and institutional policy implementation often produces gaps in enforcement. Literature conceptualizes regulatory frameworks as multi-layered systems comprising national legislation, professional standards, international research ethics guidelines, and quality assurance mechanisms. Macfarlane (2020) argues that regulatory frameworks increasingly incorporate risk management principles, compelling universities to adopt proactive measures to prevent academic misconduct. A conceptual distinction must therefore be drawn: institutional policies are internally generated instruments, whereas regulatory frameworks represent externally derived normative systems within which those policies must align. However, the two constructs are interdependent; institutional policies derive legitimacy from regulatory frameworks, and regulatory frameworks rely on institutional policies for operationalization.

Enforcement mechanisms refer to the procedural and institutional arrangements through which policy violations are investigated, adjudicated, and sanctioned. These

mechanisms may include disciplinary committees, ethics boards, plagiarism detection systems, appeals processes, and graduated sanctions. Egbule and Omodan (2022) note that enforcement mechanisms often face challenges related to procedural delays, inadequate documentation, and concerns about impartiality. They argue that effective enforcement requires transparency, trained adjudicators, and consistent sanctioning frameworks. Eaton (2021) emphasized that institutions with clear investigative procedures and proportionate sanctions demonstrate stronger compliance outcomes and higher trust among stakeholders. Enforcement mechanisms must be distinguished from compliance structures. While enforcement focused on reactive processes responding to violations compliance structures encompass preventive systems designed to encourage adherence before violations occur. Nonetheless, enforcement credibility significantly influences voluntary compliance; where sanctions are inconsistently applied, compliance culture weakens.

Compliance structures refer to the institutional systems established to ensure adherence to policies and regulations. These may include internal audit units, ethics training programs, research monitoring systems, compliance officers, and reporting channels. In Nigerian public universities, compliance structures are often evolving. Adeyemi and Oladipo (2024) observe that universities with dedicated academic integrity units and digital monitoring platforms report fewer repeat offenses compared to institutions relying solely on ad hoc committees. Their analysis highlights the importance of institutionalization rather than episodic enforcement. Research conceptualizes such structures as embedded governance systems integrating monitoring, training, reporting, and accountability loops. Kaptein (2022) argues that compliance structures are effective only when supported by ethical leadership and organizational culture; otherwise, they risk becoming bureaucratic formalities. Compliance structures therefore differ conceptually from enforcement mechanisms. Enforcement is event-specific and corrective, whereas compliance structures are systemic and preventive. Together, they form the operational core of institutional policies on academic integrity.

Ethical research culture refers to the patterned expectations, shared meanings, and institutional arrangements that guide responsible research behaviour within an academic community. Iroegbu and Adekunle (2022) define ethical research culture as the collective institutional orientation that shapes how researchers understand authorship, data management, supervision, and scholarly responsibility within public universities. This reflects a service practical orientation grounded in day-to-day research administration. It emphasizes lived practices rather than abstract principles. Anderson and Martinson (2021) conceptualize ethical research culture as the integration of shared moral commitments, transparent governance, and supportive infrastructures that promote responsible conduct of research across all career stages. This highlights systemic embedding and institutional design. It views culture as both normative and structural. These definitions converge in recognizing that ethical research culture differs from research ethics regulation. Regulation establishes minimum standards, often through ethics committees and approval protocols. Culture, by contrast, concerns what is routinely expected, modelled, and rewarded. It also differs from organizational climate, which tends to describe perceptions of policies and practices at a given time. Culture operates at a deeper level of shared assumptions and enduring norms.

Norms are the informal rules that govern acceptable behaviour within a scholarly community. Values represent the underlying principles that justify those norms. In research settings, norms might include proper citation practices or transparent authorship attribution, while values include honesty, fairness, and accountability. Okafor and Bassey (2020) argue that in Nigerian universities, informal norms often shape research conduct more strongly than formal policy statements, particularly in collaborative research groups. Where senior academics normalize questionable authorship practices, such norms become embedded. Internationally, Steneck and Fogelberg (2021) note that values such as transparency and

openness must be reinforced through visible leadership commitment, otherwise they remain rhetorical. It is important to distinguish norms from rules. Rules are codified directives; norms are socially reinforced expectations. Values, in turn, provide the moral foundation for both. Ethical research culture emerges when norms and values are aligned with institutional policy and consistently reinforced.

Academic integrity climate refers to researchers' shared perceptions of how seriously integrity is taken within their institution. Unlike culture, which is deep and enduring, climate is perceptual and potentially changeable. Ude and Chukwu (2023) conceptualize academic integrity climate in Nigerian public universities as the collective perception among staff and postgraduate students regarding the fairness, transparency, and consistency of research oversight processes. Their work suggests that where oversight is perceived as selective or politically influenced, trust erodes. Jordan and Troisi (2020) contend that when researchers perceive that misconduct is tolerated or inconsistently sanctioned, the integrity climate weakens, regardless of formal policy strength. Thus, climate functions as an indicator of how culture is experienced in practice.

Responses to plagiarism may be understood as the organized institutional actions designed to prevent, identify, address, and reduce incidents of textual misappropriation within academic environments. From a Nigerian perspective, Salihu and Ekwueme (2021) define responses to plagiarism as structured administrative and pedagogical measures adopted by universities to deter misconduct, investigate allegations, and enforce academic standards. Their definition reflects a service practical orientation grounded in university governance and disciplinary procedure. Bretag and Mahmud (2020) conceptualize responses to plagiarism in higher education as an integrated integrity framework that combines educational interventions, technological detection, proportionate sanctions, and rehabilitative support to promote responsible scholarship. This perspective moves beyond reaction to transformation. It views responses not merely as corrective mechanisms but as cultural interventions. These definitions demonstrate that responses to plagiarism differ from academic integrity policy. Policy establishes rules. Responses constitute the operational actions taken when those rules are at risk or breached. They also differ from general quality assurance processes, which focus broadly on standards and accreditation rather than specific misconduct behaviours. Preventive strategies refer to proactive measures designed to reduce the likelihood of plagiarism before it occurs. These may include curriculum embedded academic writing instruction, clear citation guidelines, orientation programmes, and assessment redesign. Eaton (2021) contends that prevention should focus on fostering academic literacies rather than simply warning students about penalties. Preventive strategies therefore differ from sanctions in orientation. They are anticipatory rather than reactive. They also differ from capacity building, which targets institutional actors such as lecturers and administrators rather than primarily students.

Detection systems involve technological and procedural mechanisms used to identify potential instances of plagiarism. These include similarity checking software, manual review processes, and authorship verification tools. Adebisi and Lawal (2023) conceptualize detection systems in Nigerian universities as institutionalized technological platforms integrated into thesis submission and coursework evaluation procedures. Their analysis highlights challenges such as inconsistent interpretation of similarity reports and limited staff training. Foltynnek and Meuschke (2020), emphasizes that detection systems are diagnostic tools rather than conclusive evidence of misconduct. A similarity index does not automatically indicate plagiarism; contextual judgement remains essential. Detection systems therefore differ from sanctions, which represent formal consequences imposed after due process. Sanctions refer to formal penalties imposed when plagiarism is confirmed. These may range from resubmission requirements to suspension or expulsion. Oladipo and Mensah

(2021) describe sanctions in Nigerian public universities as disciplinary measures designed to uphold institutional credibility and deter future misconduct. However, they caution that inconsistent application weakens deterrent effect. Macfarlane and Zhang (2021) argue that sanctions must be proportionate, transparent, and procedurally fair. Excessive punishment may undermine trust, while overly lenient responses may trivialize academic standards. Sanctions differ from restorative measures in that they emphasize consequence rather than rehabilitation.

Organizational Culture Theory was propounded by Edgar Schein in 1985. Schein conceptualized organizational culture as a pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group learns as it solves problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and which are taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel about those problems. The theory emphasizes that values, beliefs, norms, rituals, and symbols shape behaviour within institutions and influence ethical judgement, decision making, and professional conduct. Within universities, culture is not limited to formal regulations. It is reflected in everyday academic practices such as supervision, collaboration, authorship, assessment, and research communication. When institutional culture tolerates shortcuts, weak mentoring, and poor accountability, unethical research practices gradually become normalized. Strong ethical cultures are sustained through leadership example, shared values, and consistent institutional expectations.

This theory is best suited to this study because plagiarism in universities is rarely caused only by ignorance of rules. It is often rooted in the prevailing academic culture that either discourages or indirectly rewards unethical behaviour. Institutional policies can only be effective when they are embedded in a culture that promotes integrity, trust, transparency, and collective responsibility. Organizational Culture Theory therefore provides a useful lens for examining how policies interact with informal norms, peer influence, and leadership practices in shaping ethical research behaviour. In the context of universities in Rivers State, the theory enables the study to explore how institutional policies can move beyond compliance toward internalized ethical commitment among academics and postgraduate students, thereby strengthening sustainable ethical research culture. This focus supports development of context sensitive interventions that address systemic drivers of plagiarism and reinforce accountability across departments, faculties, and institutional governance structures, ensuring long term integrity outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

Universities, as centers of knowledge production and intellectual advancement, are increasingly challenged by the persistent occurrence of plagiarism, which undermines academic credibility and institutional reputation. Despite the existence of formal policies in many Nigerian public universities, including those in Rivers State, enforcement remains inconsistent, with some institutions demonstrating limited capacity to monitor, detect, or sanction unethical research practices effectively. This weak enforcement is often compounded by cultural tolerance or institutional silence, where unethical behaviors are normalized, overlooked, or inadequately addressed, creating an environment in which plagiarism can thrive. Moreover, where sanctions exist, they are frequently applied inconsistently, and reporting mechanisms are fragmented, leading to perceptions of arbitrariness and inequity. Such gaps weaken the intended deterrent effect of institutional policies and challenge the cultivation of a comprehensive ethical research culture. While studies on plagiarism exist globally and within Nigeria, there remains a paucity of empirical research that systematically examines the relationship between institutional policy frameworks, ethical research culture, and actual responses to plagiarism in universities specifically in Rivers State. This lack of contextualized evidence highlights the need for a descriptive investigation to map existing

practices, identify institutional strengths and weaknesses, and provide actionable insights into how policy and culture interact to shape responses to academic misconduct. It is against this background the study seeks to examine the Institutional Policies and Ethical Research Culture as Responses to Plagiarism in Universities in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate the institutional policies and ethical research culture as strategies for curbing plagiarism in universities in Rivers State, Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. find the level of effectiveness of institutional policies in curbing plagiarism in public universities in Rivers State.
2. ascertain the level of ethical research culture on the prevention and management of plagiarism among academic staff and postgraduate researchers in public universities in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study;

1. What is the level of effectiveness of institutional policies in preventing and managing plagiarism in public universities in Rivers State?
2. What is the level of ethical research culture in shaping institutional responses to plagiarism among academic staff and postgraduate researchers in public universities in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

Ho₁: There is no significant difference between the mean rating of institutional policy effectiveness in preventing and managing plagiarism in public universities in Rivers State.

Ho₂: There is no significant difference between the mean rating of ethical research culture in shaping institutional responses to plagiarism among academic staff and postgraduate researchers in public universities in Rivers State.

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. This design is appropriate where the researcher seeks to obtain systematic data on existing conditions, practices, and perceptions without manipulating variables. The focus of this study is institutional policy frameworks and ethical research culture as they operate within public universities. These are naturally occurring organizational phenomena and cannot be experimentally altered. Nworgu (2015) maintains that descriptive survey research is particularly suitable for studies that investigate opinions, attitudes, and institutional realities within educational systems. In the present context, the design permits the collection of quantifiable data from academic staff, postgraduate students, and research administrators across multiple institutions. The population comprised 840 respondents drawn from three public universities in Rivers State, Nigeria namely: University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. The distribution of the population was obtained from the respective Offices of the Registrars and Academic Planning Units (2025 records) of the three institutions. The accessible population consisted of: Academic Staff, Postgraduate Students, Research Administrators or Officers. These categories were selected because they occupy strategic positions in the formulation, enforcement, and experience of institutional plagiarism policies. A sample size of 270 respondents was determined. A stratified random sampling technique was employed. The population was first divided into three strata: Academic Staff, Postgraduate Students, and Research Officers. Proportionate allocation produced the following distribution: Academic Staff: 103, Postgraduate Students: 154, Research Officers: 13. Total: 270. Within each stratum, simple random sampling was applied to ensure equal

probability of selection. it guarantees institutional balance and strengthens the validity of generalization Data were collected using a self-structured questionnaire titled: Institutional Policies and Ethical Research Culture Questionnaire (IPERCQ) The instrument was divided into clearly defined sections aligned with the study variables: Items were structured using a four-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (4) Agree (3) Disagree (2) Strongly Disagree (1) Validation was undertaken to ensure that the instrument measured what it was designed to measure. The instrument was examined for clarity, readability, and logical alignment with the study objectives. Ambiguous expressions were restructured for precision. Each item was mapped against the research questions and study variables to ensure adequate construct coverage. This ensured that institutional policy dimensions and ethical culture indicators were comprehensively represented. two specialist in Educational Management and one in Measurement and Evaluation the instrument. Their suggestions informed refinement of item structure, elimination of redundancy, and strengthening of conceptual alignment. Reliability of Instrument: A pilot test was conducted using 30 respondents from a public university outside Rivers State to avoid Ascertain the instrument reliability, Responses were coded and the internal consistency. Was determined using Cronbach Alpha Reliability Coefficient Cronbach's Alpha was computed to determine reliability. The coefficients obtained was.85 The overall Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient was 0.83. Mean and Standard Deviation, the decision rule was based on a 0.05 level of significance and t-test was used to test the hypotheses.

Results

Research Question one: What is the level of effectiveness of institutional policies in preventing and managing plagiarism in public universities in Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation on Institutional Policy Effectiveness

SN	Item Statements	Mean	SD	Decision
1	The university has a clearly written plagiarism policy that is easily accessible to academic staff and postgraduate students.	3.21	0.73	Agreed
2	The university provides training workshops or seminars that help students understand proper citation and referencing practices.	2.98	0.84	Agreed
3	The university makes effective use of plagiarism detection software for screening undergraduate and postgraduate research work.	3.29	0.68	Agreed
4	At the point of student registration or orientation, the university provides clear guidance on what constitutes plagiarism.	2.91	0.86	Agreed
5	Academic staff consistently remind students about plagiarism rules before submission of major academic work.	3.08	0.79	Agreed
Cluster Mean		3.09	0.78	Agreed

Table 1 revealed that the level of effectiveness of institutional policies in preventing and managing plagiarism in public universities in Rivers State is high. The respondents agreed that universities have developed structured and accessible policies that guide academic conduct and research integrity. The results suggest that policy frameworks are operational and contribute to the regulation of scholarly activities across academic staff, postgraduate students, and administrative personnel. The consistent use of plagiarism detection software and institutional reminders indicates a strong compliance-oriented system that supports ethical academic behaviour. Nevertheless, the slightly lower ratings on training workshops and orientation programmes suggest that awareness and preventive education require further strengthening. This implies that while formal policies are established, continuous capacity building and ethical mentoring should be intensified to promote deeper understanding of academic integrity beyond compliance.

Research Question two: What is the level of ethical research culture in shaping institutional responses to plagiarism among academic staff and postgraduate researchers in public universities in Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation on Ethical Research Culture

SN	Item Statements	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Academic staff openly discusses research integrity and originality during postgraduate supervision meetings.	3.14	0.76	Agreed
2	There is a shared understanding that plagiarism damages institutional credibility.	3.28	0.71	Agreed
3	There is mutual accountability among colleagues to uphold ethical standards in publications.	3.06	0.83	Agreed
4	Supervisors guide postgraduate researchers on paraphrasing, synthesis, and acknowledgement of sources.	3.19	0.75	Agreed
5	When plagiarism occurs, academic standards are prioritized above personal relationships.	2.97	0.88	Agreed
Cluster Mean		3.13	0.79	Agreed

Table 2 indicates that ethical research culture in public universities in Rivers State is high and plays a significant role in shaping institutional responses to plagiarism. Respondents agreed that research integrity is emphasized during supervision, and there is shared awareness of the reputational consequences of plagiarism. The results suggest that ethical norms and professional accountability influence preventive and corrective measures. However, the slightly lower perception of collective accountability implies the need for stronger collegial monitoring and support. The standard deviation values indicate moderate consensus, suggesting relatively uniform ethical expectations across institutions. Practically, strengthening mentorship and collaborative responsibility will further consolidate ethical research culture.'

Hypothesis

Hypothesis One

H₀₁: There is no significant difference between the mean rating of institutional policy effectiveness and the criterion mean of 2.50.

Variable		Sample Mean	Test Value	t	df	p-value	Decision
Institutional Effectiveness	Policy	3.09	2.50	12.36	268	0.000	Reject H ₀

Table 1 revealed that the mean rating of institutional policy effectiveness ($M = 3.09$) was significantly higher than the criterion mean of 2.50, $t(268) = 12.36$, $p < .05$. Since the obtained p-value of 0.000 is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was rejected. This finding indicates that respondents perceived institutional policies relating to plagiarism prevention and management as significantly effective. The result suggests that public universities in Rivers State have established policy frameworks that are sufficiently sound to guide academic conduct, discourage unethical scholarly practices, and promote compliance with established research standards. The significant difference between the observed mean and the benchmark further implies that institutional policies play an important role in strengthening academic integrity, enhancing accountability, and supporting ethical research practices within the university system.

Hypothesis Two

H₀₂: There is no significant difference between the mean rating of ethical research culture and the criterion mean of 2.50.

Variable	Sample Mean	Test Value	t	df	p-value	Decision
Ethical Research Culture	3.13	2.50	13.02	268	0.000	Reject H ₀

Table 2 showed that the mean rating of ethical research culture ($M = 3.13$) was significantly higher than the criterion mean of 2.50, $t(268) = 13.02$, $p < .05$. Given that the p-value of 0.000 is less than the established significance level of 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected. This finding demonstrates that ethical research culture is perceived as a significant factor in addressing plagiarism within public universities in Rivers State. The result suggests that the presence of shared ethical values, adherence to professional standards, effective mentorship, responsible supervision, and institutional commitment to research integrity contributes substantially to discouraging plagiarism and promoting responsible scholarly conduct. The significant outcome further indicates that ethical research culture serves as a basis for improving transparency, originality, and accountability in academic research, thereby strengthening the overall quality and credibility of university research outputs.

Discussion

The study established that institutional policies designed to prevent and manage plagiarism in public universities in Rivers State are rated high and significantly above the criterion mean. This indicates that regulatory frameworks, monitoring systems, and institutional guidelines are operational and recognized by academic staff, postgraduate students, and administrative personnel. The findings suggest that universities have institutionalized compliance mechanisms such as documented policies, plagiarism detection technologies, and structured academic supervision, which collectively enhance research integrity. The results align with the conceptual expectation that strong institutional governance promotes responsible academic behaviour and reduces unethical scholarly practices. The positive rating reflects institutional strength in policy formulation and enforcement. However, the relatively lower perception of training and awareness programmes indicates a gap in sustained ethical orientation. This suggests the need to strengthen preventive education, mentorship, and continuous professional development. The findings further imply that universities should focus on building a value driven ethical culture rather than relying primarily on compliance measures. Strengthening ethical engagement, monitoring, and research capacity development will sustain institutional credibility and address emerging plagiarism risks. This position is consistent with the view that institutional regulation and ethical culture are complementary in promoting academic integrity Okeke, (2021).

The study found that ethical research culture is rated high and significantly above the criterion mean. This suggests that shared values, supervision practices, and professional accountability contribute to institutional responses to plagiarism. The findings indicate institutional strength in promoting research integrity through mentoring, open academic dialogue, and collective responsibility. However, the results also reveal a need to strengthen collegial monitoring and reinforce ethical norms beyond formal supervision. This supports the conceptual expectation that ethical culture complements institutional policies in promoting academic honesty. Strengthening collaborative learning, professional socialization, and continuous ethical engagement will enhance sustainability of research integrity. These findings align with the position that ethical culture remains central to institutional credibility and quality assurance in higher education Nwafor, (2020).

Conclusion

Base on the finding the study concluded that formal plagiarism policies, orientation programmes, supervisory guidance, and the use of detection software are firmly established across the institutions studied. These measures are not superficial declarations. They are perceived as active instruments shaping academic conduct. Beyond regulatory mechanisms, the study reveals that ethical research culture plays a decisive role in sustaining institutional responses. Open discussions on originality, supervisory mentoring on scholarly writing, and shared recognition of reputational risk collectively strengthen policy enforcement. In the Nigerian university environment, where increased postgraduate enrolment, promotion pressures, and digital information access intensify academic competition, this cultural dimension becomes indispensable. However, the evidence suggests that effectiveness, while high, is not absolute. Variations in enforcement consistency and mentoring depth remain visible across departments. The study therefore concludes that durable control of plagiarism in Rivers State universities depends on the interaction between clear institutional rules and lived ethical practice. Institutional integrity must be embedded not only in written policy documents but in everyday academic behaviour, supervisory relationships, and departmental norms.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the followings recommend were made:

1. Universities should periodically review and update plagiarism policies to reflect emerging digital related risks.
2. Mandatory annual research integrity training should be introduced for academic staff and postgraduate students.
3. Plagiarism detection reports should form part of thesis and dissertation submission requirements across all faculties.
4. Supervisory workload should be regulated to ensure adequate mentoring on citation, synthesis, and originality.
5. Universities should foster inter university collaboration in Rivers State to share best practices on academic integrity management.

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