

UNETHICAL BEHAVIOURS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN EDO STATE

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Abstract

The study examined the prevalence and causes of unethical behaviours among university students in Edo State. Four research questions guided the study. The population of the study comprised all the 39,243 full-time undergraduate students from the 14 faculties that make up the University of Benin. A sample size of 300 undergraduates took part in the study. The instrument used for the study was a structured questionnaire designed by the researchers titled: Prevalence and Causes of Unethical Behaviours Questionnaire (PCUBQ). The instrument was validated by three experts from Faculty of Education, University of Benin. The reliability of the instrument was established through a Cronbach's Alpha statistics. Thus, Cronbach's Alpha value of .77 was obtained as the reliability value of the instrument. The findings revealed among others that students are not always punctual and regular at their lectures and high cost of education and poor academic performance were identified as a very high cause of unethical behaviour among university students in Edo State. It was concluded that there was high prevalent rate of unethical behaviours among university students in Edo State. It was therefore recommended among others that, university students should be punctual and regular at their lectures as these will enhanced their performance cumulatively. For this purpose, strict adherence to no 75% attendance for students to take examinations should be implemented by the university.

Keywords: Unethical Behaviour, University Students, Academic Misconduct, Student Discipline, Higher Education, Moral Decadence

Introduction

The problem of unethical behaviours continues to be a major concern in many organizations, higher learning institutions inclusive. There appears to be an increasing interest in problems related to academic integrity in higher education by various education stakeholders of universities. The university is a community of students, and staff who are involved in the business of learning, teaching, research and other activities. Universities offer students the necessary support to achieve academic success, establish standards of conduct to promote responsible living, outline expectations for student behaviour, and implement procedures for addressing cases of unacceptable or unethical conduct.

Unethical behaviour can be defined as an action that falls outside of what is considered morally right. This kind of behaviour seems to occur among students, lecturers and administrative staff of higher institutions. Higher institutions of higher learning have been created to produce sound graduates as well as scholars in the society. This is the reason why critical role of higher educational institutions in Nigeria is succinctly summarized in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) as to contribute to the National development through relevant high-level manpower preparation to develop as well and as to inculcate proper value for the survival of the society and to promote scholarship, community service, national unity and international understanding. It follows that these goals may not be realized without compliance to the ethics governing the conducts of students in the university.

Ekwukoma and Osagiobare (2021) posited that university education and degrees are awarded to recipients based on good character and satisfactory learning. A good character among students seems to be the pivot of ethics. In a university setting, ethics could be seen as principles and codes of conduct for every member of the university community. The university as the highest institution of learning requires both students and staff to conduct themselves ethically and to maintain high academic standards. However, it is observed that university students often engage in unethical practices.

Unethical practices are those practices that are against the ethical code of conduct of the university. These unethical practices appear to be more prevalence among the male students than the female students. The prevalence of unethical behaviours among university students appear to vary widely between the male and female genders. Thus, gender appears to be an important factor that could cause variation in students' involvement in unethical behaviours. In a study carried out by Ebohon (2024) on gender disparity and unethical behaviours such as suicide among university students in Edo State, prevalence of suicide was found to be influenced by gender.

Unethical practices like examination malpractice, for instance, can diminish the quality of university graduate's turnout. Universities seems to spend a lot of money fighting examination malpractice, especially when it has to involve the police, and other law enforcement agents during examinations. In addition, examinations are sometimes postponed or repeated when papers leak, and these are inconveniences that cost money, energy and time (Ogiehor, 2024; Kanu & Akanwa, 2012; Idogho, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

In recent times, the increasing prevalence of unethical behaviours among students in Nigerian universities has become a matter of serious concern. These behaviours threaten the ability of higher institutions to fulfill their core mandate of producing morally upright and professionally competent graduates who can contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic and political development of the nation. University campuses have witnessed various forms of unethical practices, including indecent dressing, drug and substance abuse, plagiarism, certificate forgery, admission and hostel racketeering, and the use of fake receipts for school charges. A particularly disturbing trend is the transactional exchange for grades, commonly referred to as "*sorting*."

The persistence of these unethical practices not only undermines the quality and integrity of the university system but also poses significant consequences for families, peers, institutions, and society at large. The growing visibility and normalization of such behaviours have attracted the concern of university administrators, sociologists, psychologists, and policymakers who view the trend as detrimental to the moral and intellectual development of students.

This raises important questions: What factors are driving this apparent increase in unethical behaviour among university students? Are there specific institutional, societal, or individual-level influences that account for this phenomenon? Therefore, the problem of this study is to examine the prevalence and perceived causes of unethical behaviours among university students in Edo State, Nigeria, with a view to informing targeted interventions.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study.

1. What types of unethical behaviours are most prevalent among university students in Edo State?
2. What are the major causes of unethical behaviours among university students in Edo State?
3. Does students' gender significantly influence the prevalence of unethical behaviours among university students in Edo State?
4. Does students' gender significantly influence the perceived causes of unethical behaviours among university students in Edo State?

Hypotheses

Research questions 3 and 4 were hypothesized and tested at 0.05 level of significance.

HO1: There is no significant influence of students' gender on the prevalence of unethical behaviours among university students in Edo State.

HO2: There is no significant influence of students' gender on the perceived causes of unethical behaviours among university students in Edo State.

Methodology

Research Design: The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The choice of this design was informed by the non-manipulative nature of the study variables and the aim to obtain data directly from a large population through a structured instrument. The design enabled the researchers to describe, interpret, and analyze the opinions of undergraduate students on the prevalence and causes of unethical behaviours in the university.

Participants: The target population consisted of 39,243 full-time undergraduate enrolled across 14 faculties of the University of Benin. Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table for finite populations, a sample of 300 students was selected. A multi-stage sampling technique was applied. First, faculties were stratified into three broad categories:

1. Humanities and Social Sciences
2. Pure Sciences
3. Applied Sciences

From each category, one faculty was selected using simple random sampling: Faculty of Education (Humanities and Social Sciences), Faculty of Physical Sciences (Pure Sciences), and Faculty of Agriculture (Applied Sciences). Within each selected faculty, 15 students were chosen from each department, totaling 300 participants across 20 departments using a mix of purposive and convenience sampling.

Instrument: Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire titled "Prevalence and Causes of Unethical Behaviours Questionnaire (PCUBQ)". The instrument comprised three sections, A, B, and C:

Section A: Elicited demographic information (e.g., sex, faculty, department, level).

Section B: Focused on the prevalence of unethical behaviours through 10 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale: Most Often (4), Often (3), Sometimes (2), and Never (1).

Section C: Assessed perceived causes of unethical behaviours, where respondents ranked the causes in order of importance (1 = most common, etc.).

The validity of the instrument was ensured through expert review by three faculty members specializing in Measurement and Evaluation, Counselling Psychology, and Sociology of Education. The reliability was assessed using the split-half method on a pilot sample of 30 students not involved in the main study. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.77, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Data Collection Procedures: The researchers personally distributed and retrieved all copies of the questionnaire. Immediate collection ensured a 100% return rate and helped verify the completeness of responses. The entire data collection process adhered to ethical standards, including voluntary participation and confidentiality of information.

Data Analysis: Descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage were used to analyze responses to Research Questions 1 and 2. To test the hypotheses on gender influence, the Chi-square test of independence was used at the 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question One: What types of unethical behaviours are most prevalent among university students in Edo State?

Table 1: Prevalence of Unethical Behaviours among University Students in Edo State

S/N	Item Summary	MOF	OFT	SOT	NEV
1	Poor lecture attendance	134 (44.7%)	112 (37.3%)	37 (12.3%)	17 (5.7%)
2	Getting others to write assignment on their behalf for a fee	66 (22.0%)	108 (36.0%)	105 (35.0%)	21 (7.0%)
3	Examination misconduct	126 (42.0%)	145 (48.3%)	26 (8.7%)	3 (1.0%)
4	Plagiarism – copying from textbooks and articles without citing sources	132 (44.0%)	88 (29.3%)	65 (21.7%)	15 (5.0%)
5	Bribing lecturers to get a better grade	101 (33.7%)	109 (36.3%)	80 (26.7%)	10 (3.3%)
6	Fake school charges/fee receipts	140 (46.7%)	140 (46.7%)	16 (4.3%)	4 (1.3%)
7	Fake admission and hostel racketeering	74 (24.7%)	130 (43.3%)	72 (24.0%)	24 (8.0%)
8	Vandalizing and stealing of university property	111 (37.0%)	104 (34.7%)	73 (24.3%)	12 (4.0%)
9	Indecent dressing	151 (50.3%)	127 (42.3%)	22 (7.3%)	0 (0.0%)
10	Sexual harassment	147 (49.0%)	104 (34.7%)	28 (9.3%)	21 (7.0%)

Table 1 presents students' responses on the frequency of selected unethical behaviours in the university, categorized into: Most Often (MOF), Often (OFT), Sometimes (SOM), and Never (NEV). Each entry includes both the number of respondents and the percentage of the total responses. The table shows the following: Poor Lecture Attendance as the most common unethical

behaviour: 44.7% MOF, 37.3% OFT. This indicates that chronic absenteeism is a prevalent issue. Getting Others to Write Assignments for a Fee. Responses are more evenly spread: 36.0% OFT, 35.0% SOT. This suggests that it occurs moderately, and many students are aware of it happening occasionally. Examination Misconduct. Very high prevalence: 48.3% OFT, 42.0% MOF. This indicates that examination malpractice is rampant. Plagiarism: Commonly practiced: 44.0% MOF, 29.3% OFT. Shows a major lack of academic integrity regarding proper citation. Bribing Lecturers, 36.3% OFT, 33.7% MOF. This suggests that this unethical behaviour is perceived as relatively frequent, raising concerns about corruption in grading. Fake Fee Receipts. Highly prevalent: 46.7% MOF and 46.7% OFT. Indicates widespread financial fraud. Fake Admission and Hostel Racketeering: 43.3% OFT, 24.7% MOF. Suggests this unethical practice is moderately common, with some seeing it as occasionally happening. Vandalism and Theft of University Property: 37.0% MOF, 34.7% OFT. Suggests that damage to property is a known and frequent issue. Indecent Dressing: Most frequently cited: 50.3% MOF, 42.3% OFT. Highest combined rate (over 92%) among all items. Indicates that indecent dressing is nearly universally observed. Sexual Harassment: 49.0% MOF, 34.7% OFT. Alarming frequency, making it a serious concern for safety and discipline. Table 1 reveals that the most frequently occurring unethical behaviours (MOF + OFT) are: Indecent dressing (92.6%), Examination misconduct (90.3%), Sexual harassment (83.7%), Fake fee receipts (93.4%), and Poor lecture attendance (82.0%). These results suggest a widespread culture of unethical practices among students in various aspects – academic, financial, social, and moral.

Research Question Two: What are the major causes of unethical behaviours among university students in Edo State?

Table 2: Causes of unethical behaviours among university students in Edo State

S/N	Items	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Desire to pass examination by all cost and through any mean	13	4.3
2.	Parental influence and moral decadence in the society	37	12.3
3.	High cost of education and poor academic performance	110	36.7
4	Drug, alcohol and substance abuse	100	33.3
5.	Poor relationship with lecturer/course adviser	28	9.3
6	Peer pressure	12	4.0

Table 2 shows the perceived causes of unethical behaviours among university students in Edo State. The findings indicate that the most frequently reported cause of unethical behaviour among university students was the high cost of education and poor academic performance (36.7%), followed closely by drug, alcohol, and substance abuse (33.3%). Other notable causes included parental influence and moral decadence in society (12.3%) and poor relationships with lecturers

or course advisers (9.3%). The least cited causes were desire to pass examinations at all costs (4.3%) and peer pressure (4.0%).

Hypothesis One: There is no significant influence of students' gender on the prevalence of unethical behaviours among university students in Edo State.

Table 3: Chi-Square Test of Gender Differences in the Prevalence of Unethical Behaviours among University Students in Edo State (N = 300)

s/n	Item Summary	Gender	More Often	Often	Some-times	Never	X ²	df	p-value	Result
1	Poor lecture attendance	Male	50	41	13	2	3.47	3	.32	Sig.
		Female	84	72	25	13				
2	Getting other students/business centres to write assignment	Male	48	34	24	0	9.97	3	.01	Sig.
		Female	62	86	39	7				
3	Examination misconduct	Male	29	41	35	1	11.20	3	.01	Sig.
		Female	37	67	70	20				
4	Plagiarism – copying from textbooks and articles without citing sources	Male	49	50	8	1	0.91	3	.82	Not Sig.
		Female	77	95	18	2				
5	Bribing lecturers to get a better grade	Male	59	28	18	3	8.61	3	.03	Sig.
		Female	73	60	47	12				
6	Fake school charges/fee receipts	Male	60	47	1	0	11.61	3	.00	Sig.
		Female	48	93	15	4				
7	Fake admission and hostel racketeering	Male	28	53	20	7	3.99	3	.26	Not Sig.
		Female	46	77	52	17				
8	Vandalizing and stealing of university property	Male	50	30	23	5	7.05	3	.07	Not Sig.
		Female	61	74	50	7				
9	Indecent dressing	Male	54	44	10	–	0.96	3	.62	Not Sig.
		Female	97	83	12	–				
10	Sexual harassment	Male	63	33	5	7	7.88	3	.04	Sig.
		Female	84	71	23	14				

In Table 3, out of the 10 key unethical behaviours examined, 5 items showed significant gender differences: Getting others to do assignments on their behalf, Examination misconduct, Bribing lecturers for grades, Fake fee receipt incidents, and Sexual harassment. These behaviours are influenced by gender, suggesting targeted interventions may be needed. There were no significant gender difference in 5 items: Class absenteeism, Plagiarism, Admission/hostel fraud, Vandalism, and Indecent dressing. These are common across both genders, pointing to institutional or cultural issues affecting all students. Out of the 10 items, 5 showed statistically significant gender differences ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is rejected. This means students' gender does influence the prevalence of certain unethical behaviours in Edo State universities.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant influence of students' gender on the perceived causes of unethical behaviours among university students in Edo State.

Table 4: Chi-Square Test of Gender Influence on Causes of Unethical Behaviours among University Students (N = 300)

S/N	Cause of Unethical Behaviour	Male	Female	X ²	df	p-value
1	Desire to pass examination at all cost	7	6			
2	Parental influence and moral decay	6	22			
3	High cost of education and poor performance	44	66			
4	Drug, alcohol, and substance abuse	42	58			
5	Poor relationship with lecturer/course adviser	0	28			
6	Peer pressure	0	12			
	Total	99	192	26.95	5	.000

Table 4 shows the Chi-square test conducted to determine whether students' gender significantly influenced the perceived causes of unethical behaviour. The result showed a statistically significant difference in how male and female students identified the causes, $\chi^2(5) = 26.95$, $p = .000$. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that gender significantly influences students' perception of what causes unethical behaviour.

Discussion

The study examined the prevalence and causes of unethical behaviours among university students in Edo State. Findings revealed a high level of agreement among respondents on the widespread nature of various unethical behaviours. Specifically, students were reported to be frequently absent or tardy to lectures, engage in examination malpractice, participate in "sorting" (i.e., bribing lecturers for grades), and collaborate illegally on assignments, including acts of plagiarism. Other reported behaviours include vandalism and theft of university property, cult-related activities, indecent dressing, sexual harassment by fellow students or lecturers, and impersonation during examinations (such as writing exams on behalf of others).

These findings are consistent with the assertions of Kanu and Akanwa (2012) and Idogho (2011), who emphasized that unethical academic practices—particularly examination malpractice erode the quality of university education and compromise the credibility of graduates. Such behaviours not only damage institutional reputation but also result in significant financial and logistical burdens, as universities are often compelled to invest in enhanced security measures (e.g., deployment of police or surveillance agents) and repeat examinations due to leaked papers, leading to avoidable delays and resource wastage.

Regarding the causes of unethical behaviours, the study found that: most respondents pointed to the high cost of education and poor academic performance as the main cause of unethical behaviour among students. This is followed by drug, alcohol, and substance abuse. Parental influence and societal moral decline come next, followed by poor relationships with lecturer and

course advisers. The desire to pass exams at all cost and peer pressure were not popular causes of unethical behaviour among university students in Edo State.

These results align with the findings of Ebohon (2023), who identified low academic achievement and poor school integration as major risk factors contributing to anxiety and unethical decision-making among students. According to Ebohon, students who repeatedly experience academic failure are more likely to engage in risky and unethical behaviours. Such students are often characterized by social isolation, lack of support systems, and absence of meaningful relationships with friends and family members.

With regard to the tested hypotheses, the study established a significant influence of gender on students' experiences and perceptions of unethical behaviour. Male and female students differed notably in their responses to the following: Getting others to do assignments on their behalf, Examination misconduct, Bribing lecturers for grades, Fake fee receipt incidents, and Sexual harassment. These findings corroborate the conclusions of Ebohon (2024) and Ebohon & Omoregbe (2023), who found that behaviours such as substance abuse, suicide attempts, and examination malpractices are not only prevalent among students but also influenced by gender differences. Their studies emphasized that gender plays a role in students' exposure to and participation in unethical practices, underscoring the need for targeted interventions that consider gender-specific dynamics.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the prevalence and causes of unethical behaviours among university students in Edo State and examined gender differences in these behaviours. The findings indicate that unethical practices, such as absenteeism, examination malpractice, plagiarism, sexual harassment, and impersonation are significantly prevalent across the university system. The study also identified several contributing factors, including academic pressure, societal moral decline, poor student-lecturer relationships, substance abuse, and peer influence. Furthermore, gender was found to significantly influence both the occurrence and causes of unethical behaviours among students. These results reflect a growing concern over the erosion of academic integrity and the need for immediate, evidence-based interventions. If left unaddressed, the persistence of these behaviours could further undermine the quality of university education, diminish graduate employability, and tarnish institutional reputations.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Universities should enforce strict academic integrity policies, including clear consequences for examination malpractice, plagiarism, and impersonation. These policies should be communicated regularly through orientations, workshops, and institutional handbooks.
2. Universities should create an enabling environment and job opportunities via the Centre for Entrepreneurship Development (CED) for students to be gainfully engaged and get paid while schooling. This will help reduce the high cost of education and reduce the poor academic performance of students.
3. Institutions should integrate ethics and character education into their general studies curriculum and foster mentorship programmes that model academic honesty and responsible citizenship.
4. Faculties should create platforms for constructive student-lecturer engagement, fostering mutual respect and communication. This may reduce instances where students resort to unethical strategies due to perceived lecturer hostility or unapproachability.

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