

Students and Staff Perceptions on Examination Malpractice and Fraud in Higher Education in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to assess the perceptions of University students and staff on examination malpractice and fraud in Higher Education institutions in Zimbabwe. The study used the qualitative research methodology. Participants were drawn from four (4) Higher Education institutions. The researcher used a structured questionnaire and group interviews for data generation. The study revealed that examination malpractice and fraud is caused by fear of failure and inadequate preparation for examinations, shortage of learning and teaching resources among other factors. It was observed that the major types of examination malpractice and fraud being perpetuated in Higher Education institutions are possession of 'unauthorised materials' during examinations, copying from each other in the examination rooms. The research further revealed that examination malpractice and fraud leads to lack of confidence in Higher Educational qualifications, results in unqualified graduates, discourages hard work and lowers the standard of Zimbabwean education. The research recommended that relevant legislation be crafted and enforced and that guidance and counseling services be adequately provided to minimize the incidence of examination malpractice and fraud. Lecturers should teach their students the necessary reading skills to enable them to develop good reading habits in preparation for examinations. Management of Higher education institutions should endeavour to secure large halls to be used as venues for writing examinations.

Keywords: Examination, examination malpractice and fraud.

INTRODUCTION

According to Onyechere (1996), “examination is a formal test of a student’s knowledge, skills or ability in a particular subject especially by means of oral or written questions or practical exercises”. Liman, (1996) defines examination as a means of testing a student’s knowledge and competence. Higher Education institutions in Zimbabwe consider examinations in determining whether or not a student can proceed to the following semester or year or qualify to graduate. Examination is therefore indeed pivotal as an indicator of the success or failure of higher education and still remains the best tool for an objective assessment and evaluation of what learners have achieved after a period of attending tutorial sessions, writing of assignments and other scholarly work.

The level of students' involvement in examination malpractice in higher Education has become increasingly worrying, problematic and threatening to the well-being of Zimbabwean educational system (Sigauke 2004). The leakage of question papers, reckless impersonation in the examination centres, desperation of school proprietors, bribing examination officials, parents buying leaked papers in advance for their children before the commencement of the examinations are some of the major forms of examination malpractice and fraud as observed by Sigauke (2004).

Examination malpractice and fraud should not be taken for granted if academic institutions want to pursue best practices in examination management, (Nwahunanya 2004). Such occurrences ultimately damage public confidence in the validity and legitimacy of the examinations and results.

Liman, (1996) notes that ethical standards for examinations are being compromised and this again has become a cause for concern among stakeholders in the education sector throughout the whole world.

In the past, measures have been taken to determine the causes of examination malpractice and fraud and some strategies have been developed in a bid to curb the problem, but new examination malpractices and fraud continue to surface, (Ugwu 2008). Possible solutions to this problem remain a challenge to the integrity of the Higher Education examinations system in Zimbabwe and elsewhere.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Examination malpractice and fraud undermine the integrity and credibility of the institutions of higher Education. Examination malpractice and fraud also poses the greatest risk to the learner assessment system. It is therefore imperative that higher education institutions should create innovative mechanisms to prevent, unearth, and counter unethical and illegal behaviour in examination management.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study sought to assess the perceptions of University students and staff on examination malpractice and fraud in Higher Education institutions.

Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- To document the prevalence of examination malpractice and fraud in Higher Education.
- To identify factors which cause examination malpractice and fraud in Higher Education?
- To document the effectiveness of existing measures to curb examination malpractice and fraud in Higher Education.
- To recommend other measures to be used by Higher Education institutions to curb examination malpractice and fraud.

Key Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- How prevalent is examination malpractice and fraud in Higher Education institutions in Zimbabwe?
- What are the factors causing examination malpractice and fraud in Higher Education institutions?
- How effective are the current measures in curbing examination malpractice and fraud in Higher Education institutions?
- What other measures should be used to curb examination malpractice and fraud in Higher Education institutions?

JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

This study will enable Management of Higher Education institutions in Zimbabwe to have a clearer understanding of the problem of examination malpractice and fraud and ways of minimising these problems. This study will also enable Higher Education institutions to improve the validity, credibility and reliability of their qualifications and in this way stakeholders will have the confidence of employing graduates from Higher Education institutions in Zimbabwe.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Definition of Examination Malpractice

The World Bank (2001) defines examination malpractice as a deliberate wrong doing that is contrary to official examination rules and is purposed to place a candidate at an unfair advantage or disadvantage. Nwahunanya (2004) defines examination malpractice as the act of omission or commission intended to make a student pass examination without relying absolutely on his or her independent ability. It is therefore clear that examination malpractice is committed by a candidate single handedly or in collaboration with other people such as other higher education students, parents, lecturers, supervisors, invigilators, printers and anybody or group of people before, during or after examination in order to obtain undeserved marks or grades. Fraud is defined as a deception deliberately practiced in order to secure unfair or unlawful gain or the use of dishonesty, deception, or false representation in order to gain a material advantage or to injure the interests of others.

Forms of Examination Malpractice and Fraud

The process of examination malpractice and fraud usually commences at the setting of the examinations, right through to the writing of the examinations, their marking and grading, to the release of the results and the issuance of certificates.

Examination malpractice comes in diverse forms such as the leakage of examination papers prior to examinations and in such instances, contents of the examination could be disclosed by lecturers, examiners, printers, proof readers or college administrators. Fatai (2005) observed that students are often caught smuggling, “foreign materials” into examination rooms. Charts, answer booklets and “crib notes” may find their way into the examination rooms. These are frequently smuggled by candidates and/or their friends in pants, shoes, hems of clothing or parts of the body. Other instances have seen candidates in higher education being impersonated during the examination. Commercialization of the examination process is also possible, with candidates paying their colleagues to write examinations on their behalf,

A lot of copying sometimes occurs, with candidates reproducing other candidate’s work with or without permission. This is normally possible where there are overcrowded examination centres which have inadequate spacing between desks and have lax supervision. The same examination conditions also aide “collusion” which is another cause for concern. Collusion is when there is unauthorised passing of information between candidates in the form of scripts or notes. Substitution of scripts is another malpractice where candidates replace answer sheets handed out during the course of the examination with ones written outside the centre. The culprits in such cases can be the candidates themselves or the invigilators. Examination malpractice and fraud can be in the form of bribing staff to forge result slips or to alter obtained marks and buying and selling of examination question papers, (Olatunbosun 2009).

Fatai (2005) observed that some students could go as far as inserting micro-receivers in their ears to receive remote coaching while sitting for the examinations. If there is lax supervision, candidates can use Google or notes on their mobile phones.

Factors that Cause Examination Malpractice and Fraud

The phenomenon of examination malpractice and fraud is influenced by many factors. Udogi and Ivowi (1995) identified inadequate preparation for the examination, peer influence, poor facilities in schools, societal influence and expectations, lack of self confidence due to laziness, poor academic performance as causes or factors that prompt examination malpractice and fraud. Lack of resources for educational purposes could be another possible cause for examination malpractice and fraud, especially in developing countries such as Zimbabwe.

Maheshwari, (2011) observed that Higher education staff can be involved in examination malpractice and fraud for financial and other intangible gains from interested students.

Consequences of Examination Malpractice and Fraud

Whenever there is examination malpractice and fraud, ethical standards are compromised and for Higher Education institutions this is a cause for concern. Best practices, standards rules and regulations of the examination conduct are therefore contravened. Examination malpractice and fraud come with various effects. These acts have very serious economic, political and social

consequences that can cripple a nation. Good students are discouraged from working hard in their studies as they might be tempted to adopt the “if you can’t beat them, then join them” syndrome. This can also be prompted by seeing other corrupt students escaping any form of punishment. They believe that even if they are caught, they will get away with it too and this practice generally results in indiscipline and laziness.

Examination malpractice may also deny and frustrate innocent students to venture into the job market simply because the corrupt students will have scored “higher” grades. This may also rob a country of any chances of engaging the best brains in any form of development, Liman (1996). Kayode (2012) observes that many graduates can no longer defend their certificates. Such candidates might have psychological problems arising from the way they got their certificates as well as being unable to meet the expectations of employers. That scenario renders the goals of education invalid and point to the likelihood of collapse in the education system.

The effect of examination malpractices and fraud on the educational system and the society as a whole also affects general quality and standards of services in a country. The country will end up producing half-baked Higher Education graduates who lack the knowledge, skills and competences to exploit the resources of the nation. This could lead to a decrease in job efficiency which in turn has serious implications on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country. This will result to the creation of a poor national image and an unproductive society.

If examination malpractice and fraud is not curbed, the Higher Education system will ultimately contribute to the production of a lawless and disorderly nation.

Research Methodology

The research adopted the interpretivist philosophy. The qualitative research methodology was employed in order to understand in greater detail the behaviours, attitudes, opinions, and beliefs within higher education institutions with regard to the management of examinations. The study used the survey research design which is useful for assessing student and staff perceptions on examination malpractice in higher education institutions. Staff from only 4 Higher education institutions agreed to participate in the study. Primary research was conducted using questionnaire surveys that were administered to 80 students and 20 employees. Questionnaires were used to collect data and in-depth interviews were used to provide qualitative insights into the data collected. Apparently, secondary data was gathered from documentary evidence related to examination malpractice and fraud.

The researcher interviewed the following employees from institutions of Higher Education; Directors of Academic Registry departments, Examinations Managers and Administration officers in Examinations departments. Participants requested that the identity of their institutions should not be disclosed for ethical and confidentiality reasons.

Discussion of Findings

The study revealed the forms, causes, consequences and the various ways Higher Education institutions can combat the problem of examination malpractices and fraud. This is evidenced by the following observations at Higher Education institutions in Zimbabwe;

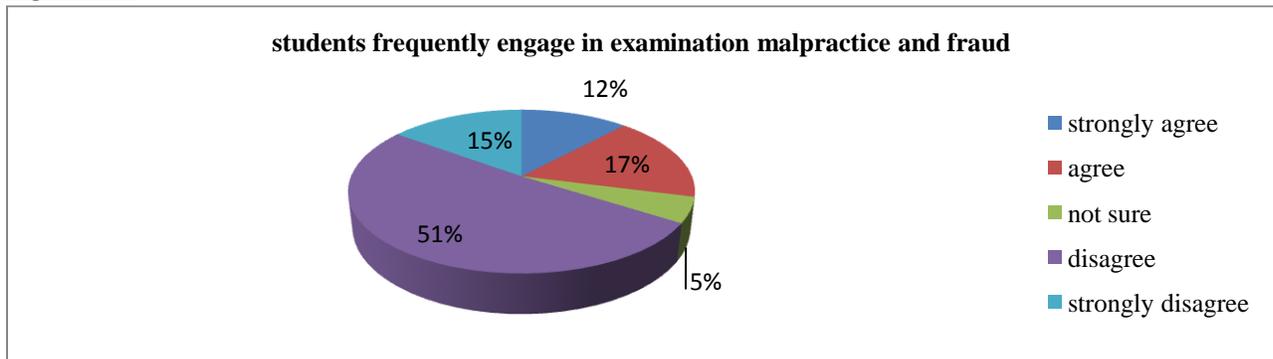
The research revealed that the majority of the respondents (70%) are in the age range 21-40 years. Given that the majority of the students studying with the Higher education institutions are middle aged, it may imply that they are mature thus capable of resisting peer pressure to indulge in examination malpractice and fraud. The assumption is consistent with findings by Anderman, Griesinger, & Westerfield, (1998) who observed that maturation of the student and exposure to different situations is a determining factor whether the student will involve himself or herself in examination malpractice.

The study highlighted that 58.6% of the respondents are males. Gender distribution among the respondents suggests that Higher Education institutions are moving towards a gender balanced student enrolment system. According to Aminullahi, (2006) women tend to be more trust-worthy and effective in promoting honest governance than men.

The study revealed that, the majority of the staff (72%) who worked in examinations departments were first Degree holders. The academic qualifications of the staff members clearly show that most of Higher Education staff members have the required qualifications to work for the examinations departments of the University.

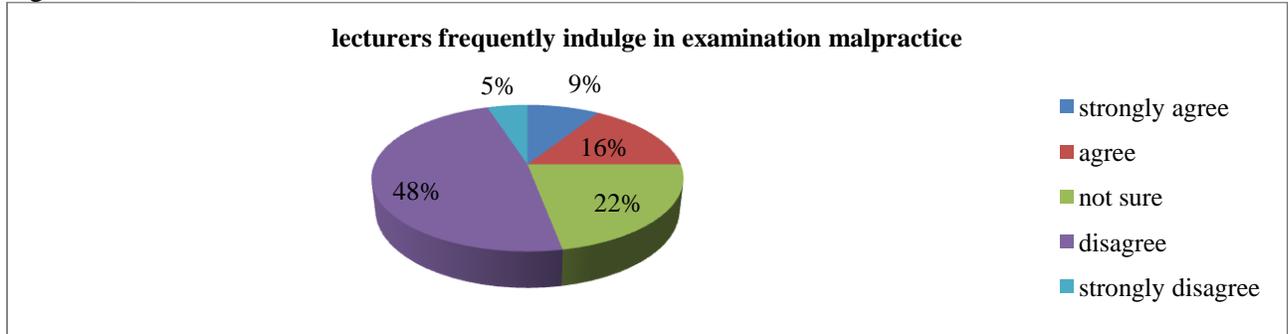
Most of the students (59%) indicated that their length of study ranges between 2-5years. The length of study for students implies that the respondents had a deeper insight of the Higher Education examination management system, thus their views and opinions in this research may be reliable.

Figure 1.1



The majority of the respondents (65%) indicated that they believe that students do not frequently engage in examination malpractice and fraud. Only 5% were not sure about this question.

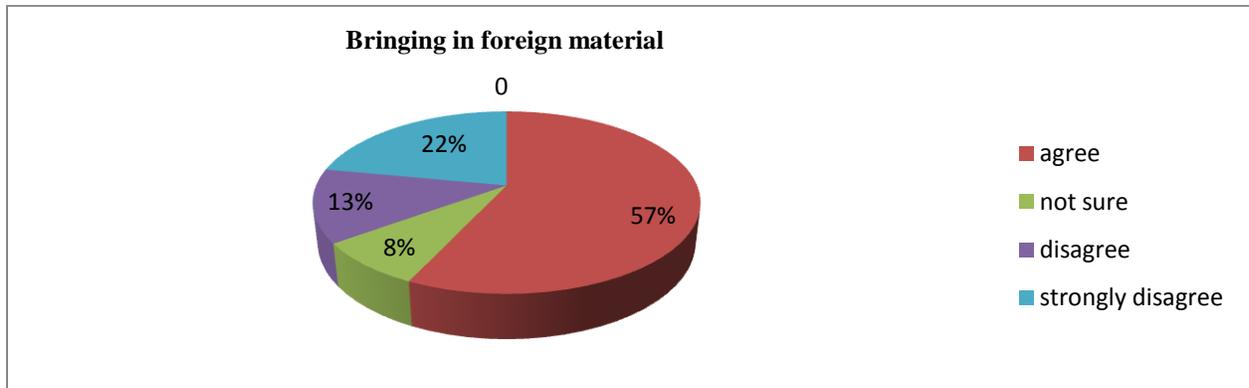
Figure 1.2



The research revealed that 53% of the respondents indicated that they believe lecturers do not indulge in examination malpractice and fraud. 22% indicated that they were not sure of this position.

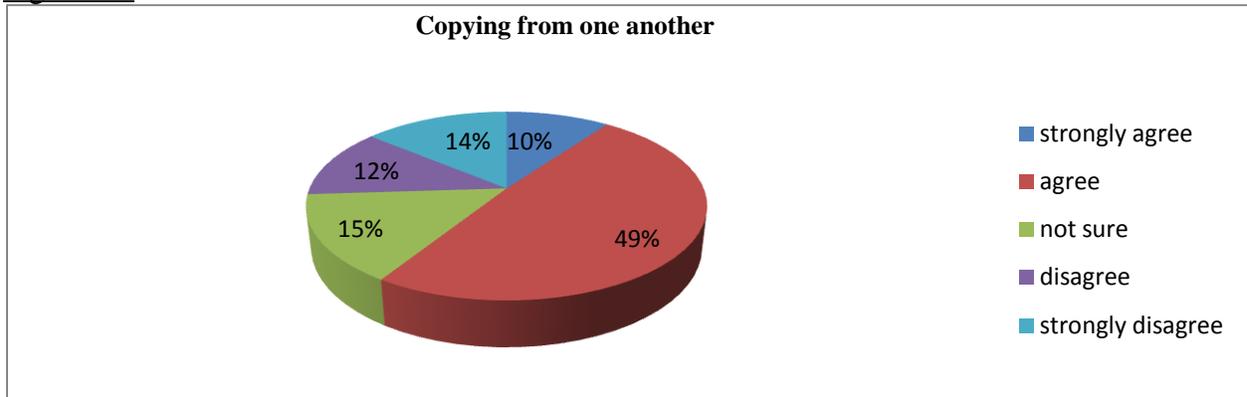
Major types of examination examination malpractice and fraud being perpetuated in Higher Education

Figure 2.1



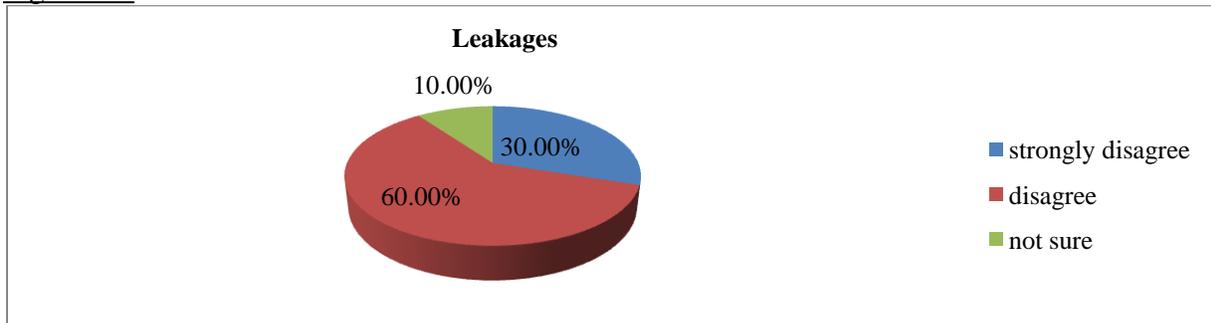
Although in Fig1.6 respondents argued that there is low examination malpractice the majority of the respondents (57%) believe that bringing in of “foreign material” is possible in Higher Education institutions. This might be due to poor security checks of students entering examination halls.

Figure 2.2



Most of the respondents (59%) (Fig 2.2) indicated that copying among students is possible in Higher Education. Interpersonal interviews with lecturers and students further highlighted that this might be due to inadequate staff available for supervision and invigilation during examinations. The respondents further revealed that there is need to provide spacious sitting arrangements in examination halls which limit copying among students.

Figure 2.3



Most of the respondents (90%) indicated that they believe that there are no examination leakages at their institutions. Some of the respondents (10%) who were not sure might be first year students who have not yet sat for examinations at their institutions and are not aware of their institutions' examination system.

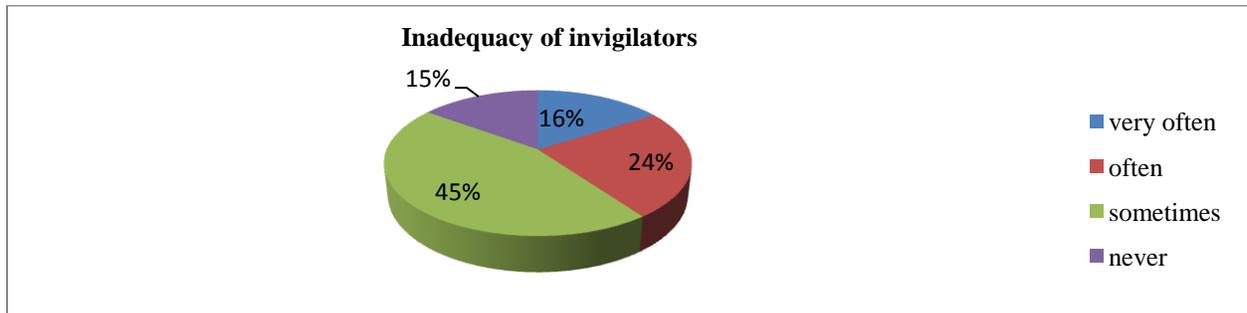
Major causes of examination malpractice and fraud in Higher Education

Figure 3.1



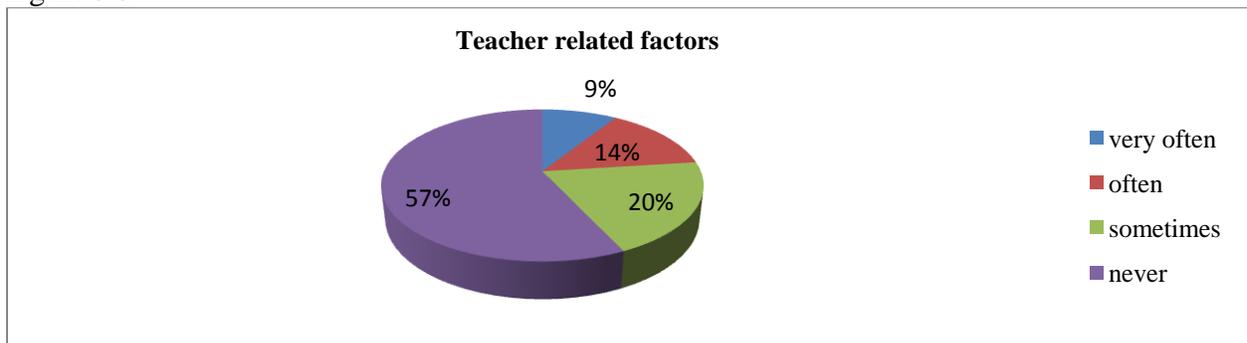
The majority of the respondents (94%) indicated that fear of failure may cause examination malpractice and fraud in Higher Education. Follow up discussions with respondents revealed that fear of failure by students may be caused by poor study habits, inattentiveness of students during tutorials, procrastination, laziness, etc.

Figure 3.2



The majority of the respondents (85%) indicated that inadequacy of invigilators may have caused examination malpractice and fraud in Higher Education institutions.

Figure 3.3



Though not significant, 43% of the respondents agreed that examination malpractice and fraud was caused by teacher related factors. The respondents further highlighted that these teacher related factors may include inadequate teacher-student interaction and inability to use modern technology to enhance teaching skills.

What Higher Education Institutions have been doing to curb examination malpractice and fraud

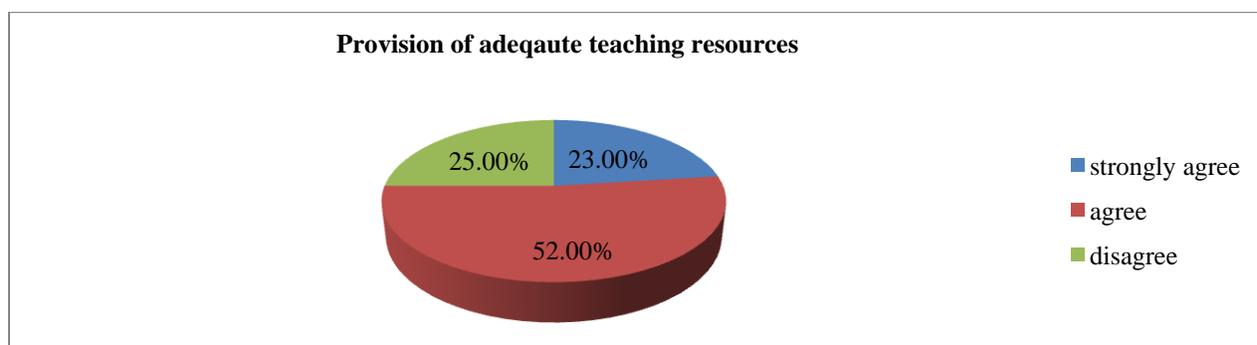
As a way of minimising examination malpractice and fraud, Higher Education institutions strive to monitor the examination processes from the time of question paper development up to the grading of the examination results. Interviews with Academic Registry personnel of various institutions of Higher education revealed that monitoring is done during the following processes;

- Question paper development
- Typing of question papers
- Compilation of final question papers
- Mass production, packaging and despatch of examination papers to examination centres.
- Question paper storage at highly secure places.
- Conducting of examinations
- Marking, moderation of examinations and involvement of External examiners during marking.
- Processing and grading of examination results.
- Results publication.

The respondents highlighted that for all these processes to be successful and free from the evils of malpractice and fraud, ethical principles have to be adhered to by all parties involved at any one time. Most Higher Education institutions in Zimbabwe are members of the International Examinations Marshals Association and work hard to uphold ethical practices.

Solutions to the Problem of Examination Malpractice

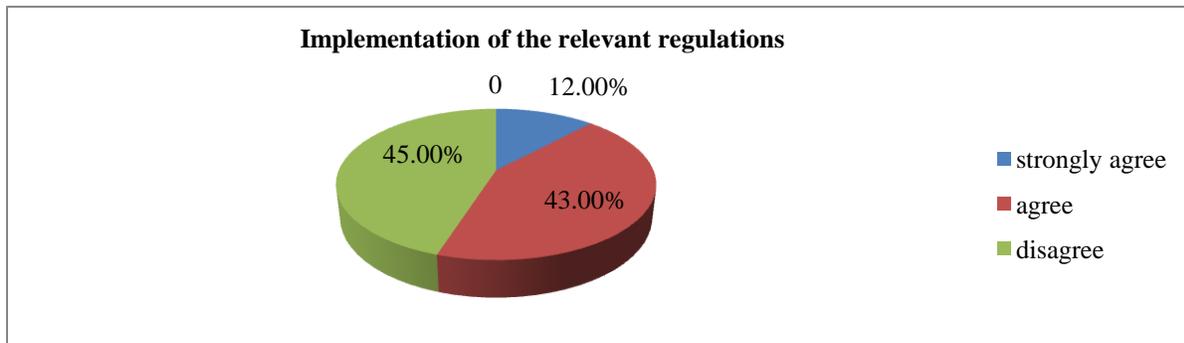
Figure 4.1



Most of the respondents (75%) highlighted that provision of adequate teaching resources could be a long term solution to examination malpractice and fraud. The respondents emphasised that

Universities should provide well equipped libraries with sufficient books and journals easily accessible even online to ensure adequate preparation for examinations.

Figure 4.2



55% of the respondents indicated that another effective intervention to examination malpractice and fraud is the full implementation of the relevant examination regulations. Government and its law enforcing agencies should also handle examination malpractice and fraud cases as criminal offences. Anyone caught cheating should be prosecuted and in addition, the names of such culprits should be published in newspapers and magazines to serve as a strong deterrent.

Follow up questions revealed that both students and staff understood that Higher Education institutions have comprehensive examination management policies and procedures but the problem could be the unwillingness and inability of those whose responsibility is to manage examinations.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that staff and students believe that examination malpractice and fraud is not a major problem among higher education institutions in Zimbabwe. They believed that possible examination malpractice and fraud could be in the form of possession of 'foreign materials', copying from one another during examination and writing information on palms and thighs. Staff and students highlighted that the major causes of examination malpractice in universities could be fear of failure, inadequate teaching and learning materials and inadequate preparation for examinations. The most serious effects of examination malpractice are increase in the production of half baked graduates, lowering of academic standards and lack of confidence in the Higher education graduates. Other effects include breeding of a generation of fraudsters and other social vices and the discouragement of hard work among students. Examination malpractice in universities could be curbed if there is emphasis on the inculcation of work ethic values, provision of guidance and counseling services, enforcement of the relevant examination regulations and provision of adequate teaching and learning resources.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following measures to curb examination malpractice and fraud in Higher Education institutions in Zimbabwe:

- The University departments responsible for managing examinations should conduct staff and student awareness campaigns and workshops to highlight the importance of the integrity of the examination system and to develop awareness about the dangers of examination malpractice. In addition, seminars and campaigns would help students and lecturers to uphold the moral values of honesty, hard work, dedication and uprightness that characterize education in Zimbabwe.
- The Examination departments in Higher Education institutions should conduct training workshops for invigilators, tutors, lecturers and administrators on best practices in examination management and awareness on the various forms of examination malpractice and fraud.
- Adequate sitting arrangements should be provided during exams to discourage cheating.
- The government of Zimbabwe should introduce effective and comprehensive legislation, providing for stringent penalties against the use of unfair means in examinations. For example, stiff penalties such as 5 years of imprisonment for any staff member convicted of examination malpractice and fraud may be a reasonable deterrent.
- There should be involvement of professional guidance and counselling services for students in Higher Education institutions to help them acquire development of effective study skills.
- Cameras could be placed in examination halls during writing of examinations. Invigilators, school authorities, and other examination officials should be put under surveillance as some of them maybe major actors in examination malpractice and fraud.
- Staff remuneration also need to be reasonable in order to minimise the temptation of engaging examination malpractice and fraud.
- National and international examination boards and organizations should share information on new threats to examination security and procedures for counteracting such malpractices.

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