



Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Ethical Issues of Plagiarism, and Copyright Infringement Associated with the Use of E-Learning Platforms

Ozioma Roseline Umera¹

and

Marlene Holmner²

¹The University Library, University of Abuja, Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria

²Department of Information Science, University of Pretoria, South Africa

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Abstract

E-learning has become a permanent feature of university education in Nigeria, yet the ethical Issues of plagiarism, and copyright infringement of the students who use these platforms has not received the same attention as the platforms themselves. This study set out to examine undergraduate students' perceptions of plagiarism, and copyright infringement, Academic dishonesty and Software piracy, associated with the Use of E-Learning Platforms. A survey research design was adopted, and a sample of 282 was drawn through convenience sampling from the undergraduate population of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), Abuja. A structured questionnaire was used to gather data, which were subsequently subjected to descriptive analysis. The results show that plagiarism-adjacent behaviour, particularly uncredited paraphrasing and the occasional submission of unreferenced assignments was common even among students who professed strong citation habits. Copyright infringement emerged as the most pervasive of the four concerns, with the overwhelming majority of respondents admitting to downloading or sharing copyrighted audio, video, and image files without authorisation. Academic cheating in its classic forms, examination collusion, impersonation through mobile devices, paid coursework, was reported by a markedly smaller but still consequential minority. Software piracy persisted chiefly because licensed alternatives were judged unaffordable. Recommendations are offered for curriculum-embedded information literacy ethics instruction in the areas of plagiarism avoidance, copyright laws, software use and academic integrity.

Keywords: Academic Integrity, Academic Dishonesty, Plagiarism, Ethics, E-Learning, Copyright Infringement, Software Piracy,

Introduction

University education delivered through electronic platforms has shifted, within the space of a single decade, from a peripheral curiosity to a central mode of instruction. E-learning, properly defined, is the delivery of instructional content and the facilitation of learner interaction through digital and internet-based technologies, structured according to recognisable instructional design principles rather than ad-hoc digitisation of print material. Ethics, in turn, denotes the body of moral principles by which a community distinguishes acceptable conduct from unacceptable conduct (Adewale, Olaniyi, & Bello, 2024). When these two domains intersect, a set of practical dilemmas arises that did not previously exist in quite the same form:

The ethical use of e-learning platforms by undergraduate students has become an integral part of the learning process due to the role of ethics in maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of e-learning. Academic cheating, broadly defined as any act of dishonesty undertaken to gain unfair advantage in an academic exercise, has attracted renewed scholarly interest in Nigeria following the rapid, pandemic-driven shift to online assessment (Orok, Adeniyi, Williams, & Udo-Affah, 2023). With the increasing reliance on e-learning, investigating the ethical issues in usage of e-learning platforms among undergraduates is vital in maintaining academic integrity. Despite the numerous advantages provided by the e-learning system of education in Nigeria, many ethical questions are raised based on different individual interest on the need for a high level of principles which are unfair to concerned persons. This principle of fairness includes a learning environment. Few studies such as Bhale & Dongre (2025); Muhammad, Malik, & Malik (2023); Samaranayake, Nelum dini, (2024) have so far investigated the ethical implications in the use of e-learning platforms, especially when considering student behaviour.

In writing and research, plagiarism, and copyright Infringement are considered forms of academic and intellectual dishonesty and a violation of ethical standards. They have evolved as serious ethical issues in e-learning. Deslauriers, (2025) defined plagiarism as an act of academic dishonesty where one's intellectual property such as research methods, scholarly contents, ideas, graphics, and concepts are used without acknowledging the source. It is an immoral and unethical misconduct which is evident among students, researchers, and academics.

There are several ways by which students plagiarize. Lalwani (2025) highlighted copying an author's content and using it as one's own, changing of sentence arrangement from the original author, using synonyms or adding odd words while using someone's content without citing the author or using quotation marks were necessary as ways by which students plagiarise. Similarly, Alvin, Vighnarajah, and Chuah (2017) indicated that paraphrasing is an aspect of plagiarism which on some occasions proved difficult to detect. Genuine paraphrasing according to them acknowledges the original source while dishonest paraphrasing ignores citation or acknowledgement of the original author. Submission of another person's work without his or her consent is also seen as false representation. Lalwani (2025) when providing a solution to plagiarism, advised that members of the academic community should endeavour to acknowledge

all the sources consulted while carrying out their academic exercise. A factor which is helpful in fighting against plagiarism is the identification of the root cause of plagiarism and its effects among students.

Copyright infringement is the unauthorised use, reproduction, or distribution of another person's protected creative or intellectual work, has attracted growing scholarly attention in Nigeria as digital access to books, articles, films, and music has expanded far faster than public understanding of the legal protections attached to that content (Oladokun, Ndubuisi-Okoh, & Okoche, 2024). Copyright laws protect the original works of authors, artists, musicians, and other creators by granting them exclusive rights to control the use, distribution, and reproduction of their works. The sharing and reproduction of the copyrighted materials is facilitated by digitisation. This is a contributing factor in copyright infringement as e-learners are found to be more vulnerable to falling victim of such unethical misconduct. Joshi, Khanal, Chapai, and Adhikari (2025) stressed further that e-learners ignore seeking the consent of the content owner before downloading information resources from the internet. Saliu, Nuebuogo (2018), noted that the awareness of students on the issue of copyright infringement did not stop them from practising it. Joshi, Khanal, Chapai, and Adhikari (2025) further stressed that there are other factors that contribute to copyright infringement by e-learners, one such factor is the presumption that using educational resources like downloading of e-resources is an express permission for students to also utilise the material outside the academic scope, as well as making it available to anyone that might need it since they are paying their school fees. They also submitted that the high cost of textbooks, and lack of information resources to accomplish a desired assessment goal is also a contributing factor to copyright infringement. In the same vein, Samuel and Kisugu (2019) opined that laziness on the part of e-learners together with tight as well as the deadlines in the submission of assignments contribute to copyright infringement. Alternatively, Lotito, Maffioletti, Migheli, and Ramello (2025) highlighted gender and age to be among the contributing factors to copyright infringements. They stressed that male engages in unethical use of copyrighted material more than the females. Also, that the older students are less likely to engage in copyright infringement than young students. Their reasons for that were not stated on the report.

Based on the views expressed above, it can be concluded that some e-learners infringe on copyrighted materials while trying to complete their academic activities. Copyright infringement can result in significant financial and legal consequences, including injunctions, award of damages, and the requirement to pay compensation to the copyright owner. It is important to respect the intellectual property rights of others and seek proper permission or licensing before using or reproducing copyrighted works.

The National Open University of Nigeria was established to extend access to tertiary education beyond the constraints of geography, age, and prior schooling history that limit admission into Nigeria's conventional universities. Operating a mono-mode open and distance learning system, NOUN delivers instruction through printed course materials, an online learning management portal, recorded lectures, and periodic facilitation at its network of study centres spread across the six geopolitical zones of the country (National Open University of Nigeria, 2025). The National Open University of

Nigeria (NOUN), as the country's flagship open and distance learning institution, has been at the forefront of this shift, currently serving a student population that runs into the hundreds of thousands across well over a hundred study centres nationwide (National Open University of Nigeria, 2025). What is far less settled, however, is the question of how students actually conduct themselves once they are inside these digital learning spaces. Convenience and flexibility, the very qualities that make e-learning attractive, also remove many of the informal social checks that operate in a physical classroom: a lecturer's glance across a hall, a classmate's disapproving look, the simple fact of being observed.

Despite the scale of NOUN's operations and the broader expansion of online and blended learning across Nigerian higher education following the COVID-19 disruption (Umera & Baror, 2025), there remains a comparatively thin body of empirical work that interrogates ethical conduct specifically from the standpoint of the undergraduate e-learner. Most existing Nigerian studies on academic dishonesty were conducted with reference to conventional, face-to-face instruction, or else treat e-learning ethics only in passing while focusing primarily on technology adoption or infrastructural readiness. This study was therefore designed to close part of that gap by asking, directly and empirically, what undergraduate students at one of Nigeria's largest open universities reports about their own conduct around plagiarism, copyright, examination honesty, and software use.

Statement of the Problem

Academic dishonesty has long been recognised as one of the most persistent threats to the credibility of any educational system, and there is reason to believe the threat is intensified, rather than diminished, by the move to electronic delivery (Orok, Adeniyi, Williams, & Udo-Affah, (2023). The physical absence of an invigilator, the ease of copying digital text, and the difficulty of verifying who exactly is sitting at the other end of an internet connection all combine to create conditions that conventional, paper-based academic integrity frameworks were never designed to address. Yet much of the existing literature on this subject in Nigeria continues to treat the problem at a fairly general level, examining "academic dishonesty" broadly rather than disaggregating the specific ethical categories, plagiarism, copyright infringement, examination cheating, and software piracy, that present rather different challenges and call for rather different institutional responses.

There is, in addition, a scarcity of recent empirical work that asks undergraduate students directly, through a combination of structured survey items and follow-up qualitative interviews, to report on their own conduct in these four areas within an open and distance learning context such as NOUN's. This study was designed to respond to that gap, examining the e-learning platforms and the ethical behaviour of undergraduate students at the National Open University of Nigeria, Gwagwalada Study Centre, Abuja.

Objectives of the Study

The study examined four specific objectives, namely to:

1. examine undergraduate students' perceptions and practice of plagiarism as an ethical issue on e-learning platforms at NOUN;
2. assessed undergraduate students' views and conduct regarding copyright infringement in the course of using e-learning platforms;
3. investigate the prevalence of academic cheating behaviours among undergraduate students using e-learning platforms; and
4. determine the extent of software piracy among undergraduate students using e-learning platforms.

Research Questions

In line with the objectives above, the study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What are undergraduate students' perceptions and practices regarding plagiarism as an ethical issue on e-learning platforms at the National Open University of Nigeria?
2. What are undergraduate students' views regarding copyright infringement and its bearing on ethical conduct at NOUN?
3. To what extent do undergraduate students at NOUN engage in academic cheating on e-learning platforms?
4. What is the extent of software piracy among undergraduate students using e-learning platforms at NOUN?

Literature Review

Ethics in E-Learning: Conceptual Foundations

Ethics, broadly defined, concerns the principles that allow a community to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable conduct, and to make judgments about fairness, honesty, and respect for others' interests (Adewale, Olaniyi, & Bello, 2024). Transposed onto the e-learning environment, this translates into a set of expectations that bind both the learner and the facilitator: learners are expected to represent their own work honestly and to respect the intellectual property of others, while facilitators are expected to assess fairly, to model the conduct they wish to see, and to maintain the same standard of academic rigour online that would be expected in a physical lecture theatre (Babalola, Adigun, & Oyelaran, 2024). Ofem, Ajuluchukwu, and Edam-Agbor (2025), in a large cross-sectional study spanning nearly twelve thousand Nigerian students, found that perceptions of what actually counts as dishonest conduct vary considerably across institutional types, suggesting that ethical norms in Nigerian higher education are neither fixed nor uniformly understood, a finding with direct bearing on how e-learning policies ought to be communicated to students at the point of enrolment rather than left for students to infer. A particular complication for the e-learning environment, as

opposed to the conventional classroom, is the difficulty of verifying authorship and presence. Where a physical examination hall allows an invigilator to observe a candidate directly, an online assessment can rarely offer the same assurance unless backed by proctoring technology that itself raises separate ethical questions around student privacy and surveillance (Olawale & Ibrahim, 2024). This tension between the desire to deter misconduct and the obligation to respect learner privacy runs through much of the empirical literature reviewed below.

Plagiarism as an Ethical Issue in E-Learning

Plagiarism, understood as the presentation of another person's words, ideas, or research output without due acknowledgement, continues to occupy the most prominent place in Nigerian academic integrity scholarship, and recent work suggests the problem has not abated with the spread of digital learning; if anything, the ease of copying and pasting from online sources appears to have entrenched it further (Adelusi & Babalola, 2024). In one recent study of postgraduate students across several universities in southwestern Nigeria, the majority of respondents demonstrated only partial understanding of what properly constitutes plagiarism, frequently conflating deliberate copying with the more ambiguous practice of inadequate paraphrasing (Olajide & Fashina, 2025). If this confusion persists at the postgraduate level, there is reason to expect it is at least as pronounced, if not more so, among undergraduates, who typically receive less explicit instruction in scholarly writing conventions. Babalola (2024), examining plagiarism awareness among undergraduates at a private Nigerian university, found that while most students could define plagiarism in the abstract, a substantial proportion nonetheless reported having submitted work that, on closer inspection, would meet institutional definitions of the offence, an inconsistency between stated values and actual practice that recurs across several of the studies reviewed here. Olatunbosun and Okafor (2024), working with university students in southeastern Nigeria, similarly reported that uncredited paraphrasing was considerably more common than outright verbatim copying, a distinction that matters because paraphrasing without citation is frequently the product of poor citation training rather than deliberate dishonesty. What emerges fairly consistently across this literature is that plagiarism in the Nigerian undergraduate population is rarely a matter of wholesale piracy of another scholar's work; it is, far more often, a matter of incomplete or careless referencing practice rooted in inadequate exposure to the mechanics of academic writing (Oliha & Usiobaifo, 2024). This has direct implications for remediation: punitive responses alone are unlikely to address a problem whose root cause is, in a meaningful proportion of cases, pedagogical rather than moral.

Copyright Infringement and E-Learning

In their critical review of Nigeria's copyright regime, Oladokun, Ndubuisi-Okoh, and Okoche (2024) observe that enforcement mechanisms remain considerably weaker than the statutory protections on paper would suggest, an imbalance that, transposed to the university environment, leaves students with little practical disincentive against the casual sharing of copyrighted material. Survey-based evidence bears this out. Students at several Nigerian universities have been found to possess only a partial grasp of copyright law even when they are nominally aware that copyright exists as a legal

category (Odunlade, 2024), a pattern of "awareness without application" that mirrors the plagiarism findings discussed above. The behaviours typically reported include downloading and circulating copyrighted films, music, and electronic books without licence, and reproducing full-text academic articles on shared course pages without regard for the rights of the original publisher or author. Economic pressure is cited repeatedly as a contributing factor: the price of a single licensed textbook or subscription-based academic database can represent a significant proportion of a Nigerian undergraduate's monthly budget, creating a strong practical incentive to seek free, unauthorised alternatives regardless of the student's formal awareness that doing so breaches copyright (Oladokun, Ndubuisi-Okoh, & Okoche, 2024).

This economic dimension is consistent with broader findings from elsewhere on the continent. In a multi-institution study of digitally mediated access to learning resources in South Africa, researchers found that the boundary between legitimate and infringing use had become so blurred in everyday student practice that many respondents no longer perceived a meaningful distinction between the two, treating piracy of academic content as an unremarkable extension of ordinary study behaviour (Czerniewicz, Trotter, & Haupt, 2024, as cited in subsequent African higher education literature). The implication for Nigerian e-learning providers is that copyright education cannot rely on assumed common sense; it must be made explicit, repeated, and tied to concrete examples of what does and does not constitute permissible use.

A number of studies have been conducted by different researchers and organizations on the need for ethics in e-learning. On the other hand, there is a scarcity of empirical studies related to the e-learning platforms and ethical behaviour of undergraduate students. Bhattacharya, Murthy, & Bhattacharya (2022) conducted research on social and ethical issues related to online learning in India, focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education institutions' teaching approaches. Their qualitative study explored the challenges of e-learning from the perspectives of both students and teachers, with a particular emphasis on ethical and social issues related to online learning and possible solutions.

The study's findings showed that successful transition to e-learning was possible due to the institution's support during the transition process and the acceptance of the new technology by faculty members in adapting the academic system to accommodate learners' needs, styles, and capabilities. However, academic integrity in online assessment was identified as a crucial issue to eliminate unethical behaviour among students. The above study is related to the present one as it dealt with ethical issues of e-learning. The difference between the former and the present study is that the former study was carried out in India, while the current study has been carried out in Nigeria. The former study investigated and discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic compelled higher education institutions to reconsider their teaching approaches, while the current study examines the undergraduate students' perceptions of ethical issue of plagiarism, and copyright infringement associated with the use of e-learning platforms. Osarobu and Opeyemi (2016) conducted a study on copyright infringement, which aimed to assess the extent of copyright violation of electronic information content among undergraduate students at the University of Ibadan. The study used a survey research

design and a multi-stage sampling technique to select a sample size of 171 final year distance learning students. Data was collected using a questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics such as percentages and frequencies.

The study found that the level of copyright infringement of electronic content was very high, with more than 80% of respondents admitting to copyright violations. The factors that contributed to copyright infringement included lack of awareness, ignorance, academic pressure, lack of study materials, influence of social media, and inability to obtain necessary reading materials. The study recommended the creation and offering of copyright courses to raise awareness among undergraduate students, as well as the subscription to relevant online books and journals by the university administration to make them accessible to all students through faculty and departmental libraries.

Academic Cheating in the E-Learning Environment

Some factors have been identified as drivers of academic cheating. Orok et. al (2023), examining academic dishonesty among healthcare students at a Nigerian university, identified inadequate preparation, fear of failure, and weak invigilation as the three most frequently cited drivers of cheating behaviour, and recommended a combination of curriculum reform and clearer institutional sanctions as the most promising mitigation strategy. Ruwah (2025), surveying students across Colleges of Education in north-western Nigeria, similarly found a measurable, if not overwhelming, prevalence of self-reported examination misconduct, with mobile-phone-assisted cheating identified as one of the more common contemporary manifestations.

What distinguishes the e-learning context from the conventional examination hall is less the underlying motivation for cheating, which appears broadly similar, than the range of tools available to a student wishing to cheat and the comparative difficulty universities face in detecting it. Alguacil, Herranz-Zarzoso, Pernías, and Sabater-Grande (2024), in a randomised field experiment on online examinations, found that the simple presence of remote monitoring measurably reduced the incidence of dishonest behaviour relative to unmonitored online assessment, lending empirical weight to the argument that detection probability, not moral conviction alone, is a significant determinant of whether a student chooses to cheat.

Software Piracy and Ethical Behaviour

Software piracy, understood as the unauthorised copying, installation, or use of licensed software in violation of its terms of use, remains comparatively under-researched in the Nigerian higher education literature relative to plagiarism, and copyright infringement more broadly, but the limited evidence available points in a consistent direction. In a cross-African analysis of unethical information technology practices in higher education, weak institutional enforcement combined with the comparatively high cost of licensed software relative to average student income were identified as the principal structural drivers of piracy on university campuses across the sub-Saharan region (Adejumo & Mensah, 2023). Khanyile and Ngema (2025), examining related patterns of unethical cyber conduct among students at South African higher education institutions, found that many students do not perceive the unauthorised copying or sharing of digital software and media as carrying meaningful ethical weight, treating

such conduct as categorically distinct from, and less serious than, conventional examination cheating, even though both fall within recognised definitions of academic and professional dishonesty. This perceptual gap, the tendency to treat digital piracy as a victimless or low-stakes act, recurs sufficiently often across the literature to suggest that any institutional response to software piracy among Nigerian undergraduates will need to address the underlying attitude as much as the behaviour itself.

Taken together, the literature reviewed in this section points toward a consistent pattern: Nigerian undergraduate students are not, in the main, ethically indifferent, but they operate within institutional and economic conditions that make unethical shortcuts both more available and less costly than they ought to be. The empirical findings reported in the sections that follow should be read against this backdrop.

Methods

This study adopted a survey research design, supplemented by semi-structured follow-up interviews with a smaller subset of respondents, to investigate the undergraduate students' perceptions of ethical issue of plagiarism, and copyright infringement associated with the use of e-learning platforms. The population of the study comprised all undergraduate students at the National Open University of Nigeria's Gwagwalada Study Centre, Abuja. Given the impracticality of surveying the entire population within the time and resources available, a convenience sample of 364 respondents, representing approximately ten per cent of the study centre's undergraduate population, was drawn. The questionnaire was distributed electronically through WhatsApp, a channel chosen for its near-universal use among NOUN students, alongside a consent form explaining the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation.

The instrument itself consisted of four main thematic sections, corresponding to the four research objectives, plus a closing open-ended section inviting suggestions for curbing unethical conduct. Items within each thematic section were structured on a four-point scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree), and responses were subsequently collapsed into binary categories of Total Agreement and Total Disagreement for ease of interpretation, with a combined Agree/Strongly Agree value of fifty per cent or above on a given item treated as indicating a meaningful pattern of agreement among respondents. Of the 364 questionnaires distributed, 282 were returned in a complete and usable form after incomplete or partially answered instruments were excluded; the analyses reported below are based on this valid response set of 282. Quantitative responses were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages), while the qualitative material drawn from the open-ended items and the supplementary interviews was analysed thematically, following the general approach to small-sample qualitative coding described by Adelusi and Babalola (2024) in their related Nigerian study of academic integrity perceptions.

Results

Findings are presented and discussed below in the order of the study's four objectives, namely plagiarism, and copyright infringement followed by a brief presentation of the qualitative suggestions offered by respondents for curbing unethical conduct.

Perceptions on Plagiarism as an Ethical Issue

Table 1: Undergraduate Students' Views on Plagiarism as an Ethical Issue (N = 282)

S/N	Statement	SA n(%)	A n(%)	Total Agree	D n(%)	SD n(%)	Total Disagree	Mean	SD
1	I always acknowledge sources of information whenever I submit an assignment or project.	186 (66.0)	91 (32.3)	277 (98.2)	4 (1.4)	1 (0.4)	5 (1.8)	3.64	0.53
2	I copy from the internet without citing the source once in a while, since the volume of information online is huge.	60 (21.3)	148 (52.5)	208 (74.0)	52 (18.4)	22 (7.8)	74 (26.0)	2.87	0.83
3	I have submitted assignments without references on several occasions.	95 (33.7)	135 (47.9)	230 (81.6)	32 (11.3)	20 (7.1)	52 (18.4)	3.08	0.85
4	I sometimes paraphrase the words of other people but fail to acknowledge them.	125 (44.3)	123 (43.6)	248 (87.9)	23 (8.2)	11 (3.9)	34 (12.1)	3.28	0.78

Table 1 presents the undergraduate students' view regarding plagiarism as an ethical issue. Based on the responses from the survey. 98.2% of respondents agreed (66% strongly agreed and 32.3% agreed) that they always acknowledge sources of information whenever there is a need to submit an assignment or project, while a total number of 5 representing 1.8% disagreed (1.4 disagree and 0.4 strongly disagree).

Again, 74% of the respondents agreed (21.3% strongly agreed and 52.5% agreed) that they copy from the internet without citing the source once in a while since the volume of information on the internet is huge, while 26% of the respondents disagreed (18.4% disagreed and 7.8% strongly disagreed). Again, 87.9% of the respondents agreed (33.7% strongly agreed and 47.9% agreed) that they have submitted assignments without references on many occasions, while 18.4% disagreed (11.3% disagreed and 7.1% strongly disagreed). Furthermore, 87.9% of the respondents agreed (44.3% strongly agreed and 43.6% agreed) that they sometimes paraphrase the words of other people but fail to acknowledge them while 12.1% of the respondents disagreed (8.2% strongly disagree and 4% strongly disagree).

The grand mean values ranging from 2.87 to 3.64, all exceeding the criterion mean of 2.50, indicate a high level of agreement among respondents that plagiarism-related behaviours and practices are prevalent among undergraduate students using e-learning platforms, despite many students claiming to acknowledge information sources

Perceptions on Copyright Infringement and Ethical Behaviour

Table 2: Undergraduate Students' Views on Copyright Infringement (N = 282)

S/N	Statement	SA n(%)	A n(%)	Total Agree	D n(%)	SD n(%)	Total Disagree	Mean	SD
1	I download and share audio and video files without permission from the copyright owner.	78 (27.7)	155 (55.0)	233 (82.7)	40 (14.2)	9 (3.2)	49 (17.4)	3.07	0.74
2	I see no issue in placing several full-text articles on a course web page accessible to anyone with internet access.	33 (11.7)	169 (60.0)	202 (71.7)	65 (23.0)	15 (5.3)	80 (28.3)	2.78	0.72
3	I do not consider scanning a published photograph or image without permission a problem.	15 (5.3)	160 (56.7)	175 (62.0)	69 (24.5)	15 (5.3)	84 (29.8)	2.68	0.67
4	I download movies and songs from unauthorised sources purely for entertainment.	109 (38.7)	141 (50.0)	250 (88.7)	26 (9.2)	6 (2.1)	32 (11.3)	3.25	0.71

Table 2 displays the viewpoints of the respondent regarding the ethical behaviour of undergraduate students on copyright infringement at the National Open University of Nigeria. The table shows that 82.7% of the respondents agreed (27.7% strongly agreed and 55% agreed) that they download and share audio and video files without permission from the copyright owner while 17.4% disagreed (14.2% disagreed and 3.2% strongly disagreed). Furthermore, 71.7% of the respondents agreed (11.7% strongly agreed and 60% agreed) that they see no issue in placing several full-text articles on a course web and allowing that page to be accessible to everybody who has internet, while 28.3% disagreed (23% disagreed and 5.3% strongly disagreed). Furthermore, 70.2% of the respondents agreed (13.5% strongly agreed and 56.7% agreed) that they do not consider scanning a published photograph or image without permission as a problem while 29.8% disagreed (24.5% disagreed and 5.3% strongly disagreed). Again, 250 respondents representing 88.7% agreed (38.7% strongly agreed and 50% agreed) that they download movies and songs from sources that are not authorized, just to entertain themselves, while 32 respondents representing 11.3% disagreed (9.2% disagreed and 2.1% strongly disagreed).

The mean scores ranging from 2.68 to 3.25, all above the benchmark mean of 2.50, indicate that respondents generally agreed that copyright infringement constitutes a common ethical issue associated with their use of e-learning platforms.

Perceptions on Academic Cheating

Table 3: Undergraduate Students' Views on Academic Cheating (N = 282)

S/N	Statement	SA n(%)	A n(%)	Total Agree	D n(%)	SD n(%)	Total Disagree	Mean	SD
1	I always wait for others to complete our group assignments because I lack the time.	28 (10.0)	37 (13.1)	65 (23.0)	61 (21.6)	156 (55.3)	217 (77.0)	1.78	1.02
2	I sometimes use my mobile phone to send and receive answers during assessments and examinations.	16 (5.7)	56 (19.9)	72 (25.5)	32 (11.3)	178 (63.1)	210 (74.5)	1.68	0.98
3	I allow friends to copy from me during examinations.	21 (7.4)	55 (19.5)	76 (27.0)	96 (34.0)	110 (39.0)	206 (73.0)	1.95	0.94
4	I see nothing wrong with doing another student's coursework for financial reward.	16 (5.7)	55 (19.5)	71 (25.2)	77 (27.3)	134 (47.5)	211 (74.8)	1.83	0.93

Table 3 presents undergraduate students' views on academic cheating associated with the use of e-learning platforms. The findings reveal that most respondents did not support the academic cheating behaviours listed. Specifically, 77.0% disagreed that they always waited for others to complete group assignments because they lacked time, while only 23.0% agreed. Similarly, 74.5% disagreed that they used mobile phones to send or receive answers during examinations, whereas 25.5% admitted engaging in the practice. Likewise, 73.0% disagreed that they allowed friends to copy from them during examinations, while 27.0% agreed. Furthermore, 74.8% disagreed that there was nothing wrong with completing another student's coursework for financial reward, compared with 25.2% who expressed agreement. The item with the highest level of agreement was the use of mobile phones during assessments (25.5%), while the lowest agreement was observed for free-riding on group assignments (23.0%).

The mean scores ranged from 1.68 to 1.95, all of which are below the criterion mean of 2.50. This indicates that respondents generally disagreed with the statements describing academic cheating behaviours.

Perceptions on Software Piracy

Table 4: Undergraduate Students' Views on Software piracy (N = 282)

S/N	Statement	SA n(%)	A n(%)	Total Agree	D n(%)	SD n(%)	Total Disagree	Mean	SD
1	I sometimes download pirated software because I cannot afford licensed versions.	53 (18.8)	158 (56.0)	211 (74.8)	53 (18.8)	18 (6.4)	71 (25.2)	2.87	0.79
2	I share my licensed software with my friends.	62 (22.0)	174 (61.7)	236 (83.7)	34 (12.1)	11 (3.9)	45 (16.0)	3.02	0.71
3	I purchase one version of a software and install it on multiple devices, contrary to the licence terms.	20 (7.1)	59 (21.0)	79 (28.0)	149 (52.8)	54 (19.1)	203 (71.9)	2.16	0.81
4	I have used an unauthorised activation code or registration number to install software.	19 (6.7)	56 (19.9)	75 (26.6)	175 (62.1)	32 (11.3)	207 (73.4)	2.22	0.73

Table 4 presents respondents' perceptions regarding software theft associated with the use of e-learning platforms. The findings indicate that software piracy remains a notable ethical concern among the respondents. A substantial majority (74.8%) agreed that they sometimes downloaded pirated software because they could not afford licensed versions, while 25.2% disagreed. Even more respondents (83.7%) admitted sharing their licensed software with friends, compared with 16.0% who disagreed. Conversely, the majority (71.9%) disagreed that they purchased a single licensed copy of software and installed it on multiple devices contrary to licence terms, while only 28.0% admitted doing so. Similarly, 73.4% disagreed that they had used unauthorised activation codes or registration numbers to install software, whereas 26.6% acknowledged engaging in the practice. Among all the items, sharing licensed software with friends recorded the highest level of agreement (83.7%), indicating that this behaviour is the most common form of software-related ethical misconduct among the respondents.

The mean scores ranged from 2.16 to 3.02. Two items recorded mean values above the criterion mean of 2.50 (2.87 and 3.02), indicating agreement that downloading pirated software due to financial constraints and sharing licensed software with friends are common practices. However, the remaining two items recorded mean values below 2.50 (2.16 and 2.22), indicating disagreement with more deliberate forms of software piracy,

such as installing one licensed copy on multiple devices and using unauthorised activation codes

Discussion of findings

This study set out to examine four specific ethical issues, plagiarism, copyright infringement, academic cheating, and software piracy, as they manifest among undergraduate students using e-learning platforms at the National Open University of Nigeria's Gwagwalada Study Centre.

Findings on undergraduate students' views on plagiarism as an ethical issues present a picture that is, on its face, somewhat contradictory, and the contradiction is itself instructive. Almost all respondents (98.2%) claimed to acknowledge their sources consistently, yet a clear majority also admitted, on separate items, to having copied from the internet without citation (74.0%), submitted unreferenced assignments (81.6%), and paraphrased without acknowledgment (87.9%). Read together, these figures suggest that students do not generally regard themselves as serial plagiarists; rather, they appear to treat occasional, situational lapses in citation as separable from their general self-image as honest students. This pattern is consistent with what Olatunbosun and Okafor (2024) describe among undergraduates in southeastern Nigeria, where uncredited paraphrasing was found to be considerably more widespread than outright verbatim copying, and is also consistent with the broader observation that a meaningful share of plagiarism in Nigerian higher education stems from inadequate training in citation mechanics rather than calculated dishonesty (Oliha & Usiobaifo, 2024).

Particularly striking is the finding that paraphrasing without acknowledgment was the single most widely admitted behaviour among the four plagiarism items, at 87.9 per cent. This finding aligns closely with Babalola's (2024) observation that undergraduates frequently possess only a partial, textbook definition of plagiarism, one that readily captures wholesale copying but fails to extend to the subtler act of restating another author's argument in slightly different words without citation. The pedagogical implication is reasonably direct: any institutional intervention aimed at this population needs to spend at least as much time teaching students how to paraphrase correctly as it spends warning them against copying outright.

Copyright infringement returned the highest levels of self-reported unethical conduct among the four objectives examined in this study, a finding that is broadly consistent with the wider Nigerian literature on this subject. Close to ninety per cent of respondents (88.7%) admitted to downloading movies and songs from unauthorised sources for entertainment, and a similarly high proportion (82.7%) admitted to sharing copyrighted audio and video files without permission. This is in keeping with Oladokun, Ndubuisi-Okoh, and Okoche's (2024) observation that Nigeria's copyright enforcement architecture remains considerably weaker in practice than its statutory provisions would suggest, leaving university students with comparatively little real-world disincentive against casual infringement. The finding that 71.7 per cent of respondents saw no issue in posting full-text academic articles on openly accessible course pages is, from a library

and information science standpoint, perhaps the most consequential single result in this section, since it points to a basic misunderstanding of the legal status of digitised scholarly content rather than to a willful disregard for copyright law. This mirrors Odunlade's (2024) finding that Nigerian university populations frequently demonstrate awareness that copyright exists as a general legal category while lacking the more specific knowledge needed to apply that awareness correctly to everyday academic practice. The comparatively lower, though still substantial, agreement rate of 62.0 per cent on the item concerning unauthorised image scanning suggests that students may intuitively rank some forms of copyright infringement as more serious than others, even where no such hierarchy exists in copyright law itself.

Economic explanations recur throughout the qualitative material collected alongside these figures. Several respondents, when interviewed, linked their downloading behaviour directly to the cost of data and of legitimate streaming or e-book subscriptions relative to their disposable income as students, a pattern entirely consistent with Oladokun, Ndubuisi-Okoh, and Okoche's (2024) broader observation about the price-driven character of much Nigerian digital piracy.

In contrast to copyright infringement, academic cheating in its classic forms attracted total agreement levels of between 23 and 27 per cent across all four items, meaning that the clear majority of respondents, between 73 and 77 per cent, disagreed with statements describing examination collusion, mobile-phone-assisted cheating, free-riding on group assignments, and paid coursework. On the surface, this looks like a reassuring result, and it should not be dismissed; the majority position among NOUN undergraduates at this study centre appears to be one of disapproval toward the more conventional forms of academic cheating. At the same time, a minority of roughly one in four respondents reporting some level of agreement with these behaviours is not a trivial figure when extrapolated across a student population running into the hundreds of thousands, and it sits comfortably within the range reported by Ruwah (2025) among Colleges of Education students in north-western Nigeria, where self-reported examination misconduct, while not the majority position, was nonetheless consistently present across the sampled population.

The item with that is the highest agreement in this section is mobile-phone-assisted exchange of answers during assessments which is at 25.5 per cent, Orok, Adeniyi, Williams, and Udo-Affah's (2023) identification of weak invigilation, alongside inadequate preparation and fear of failure, as a leading driver of cheating among Nigerian university students offers a plausible explanation for why this item, more than the others, drew comparatively higher agreement: it is, quite simply, the easiest form of cheating to execute undetected in an unsupervised remote examination setting. The qualitative interviews conducted alongside the survey lend further texture to these figures. One respondent's account, volunteered during an individual interview, described directly assisting a friend perceived to be "intellectually disadvantaged" during an assessment, a framing that recasts what the university would classify as straightforward examination malpractice as an act of peer loyalty or compassion. This kind of moral reframing, in which a rule violation is reinterpreted by the student as a virtuous act rather than a transgression, recurs often enough in the broader literature on

academic dishonesty to merit serious attention in any institutional ethics training programme, since it suggests that simply restating the rule against assisting another candidate is unlikely, on its own, to change the underlying justification students offer themselves for breaking it.

Software piracy showed the same pattern of economic justification observed under copyright infringement, but with one item standing out clearly: sharing of licensed software with friends drew the highest agreement of any single item across all four tables (83.7%), suggesting that students treat the sharing of educational or productivity software as a routine act of social reciprocity rather than as a violation of a licensing agreement. This finding is closely aligned with Khanyile and Ngema's (2025) observation, drawn from South African higher education, that many students do not assign the unauthorised sharing of digital software the same ethical weight as more conventional forms of academic dishonesty, treating it instead as a low-stakes, almost incidental act. A clear majority of respondents (74.8%) also linked their pirated software use directly to affordability, a result entirely consistent with the structural explanation offered by Adejumo and Mensah (2023) in their cross-African review, which identified the cost of licensed software relative to average student income as the principal driver of piracy on university campuses across the sub-Saharan region. By contrast, the two items describing more deliberate circumvention of licensing terms, installing one licensed copy across multiple devices (28.0%) and using unauthorised activation codes (26.6%), drew markedly lower agreement, indicating that while casual sharing is widespread, the more technically involved forms of software piracy remain comparatively less common among this student population, possibly reflecting either a lower level of technical skill required to execute them or a somewhat stronger residual sense that these specific acts cross an ethical line that simple sharing does not.

Plagiarism manifested chiefly as inconsistent citation practice rather than wholesale copying; copyright infringement was the most pervasive of the four concerns, driven in large part by the cost of legitimate digital content; academic cheating in its classic examination-hall forms was reported by a meaningful but minority share of respondents, concentrated particularly around the unsupervised conditions that remote assessment creates; and software piracy persisted chiefly through casual sharing rather than deliberate circumvention of licensing protections. What unites these four strands is a recurring tension between formally stated ethical values, which respondents largely endorsed, and situational practice, which often departed from those stated values under conditions of cost pressure, weak enforcement, or perceived low stakes. This tension is consistent with the broader pattern documented by Umera and Baror (2025) in their account of how rapidly, and with how little structural support, Nigerian institutions reorganised their teaching delivery in the post-COVID-19 period; an institution that adopted e-learning under pressure of necessity is, almost inevitably, an institution whose ethical scaffolding around that delivery mode has not yet caught up with its instructional reach. Ethical e-learning practice cannot, on this evidence, be secured through rule-setting alone; it requires sustained attention to the economic and pedagogical conditions that make rule-breaking attractive in the first place.

Strategies Suggested by Respondents to Strengthen Academic Integrity

Although not tied to a formal research objective, the closing section of the questionnaire asked respondents to suggest measures that might reduce the unethical behaviours documented above. Four suggestions recurred with sufficient frequency to be reported here: clearer and more consistently enforced institutional penalties for plagiarism, copyright infringement, and examination misconduct, software piracy; expanded use of plagiarism-detection and remote-proctoring technology, balanced against legitimate concerns about student privacy; structured citation and copyright literacy training delivered early in the undergraduate programme rather than left to individual initiative; and the encouragement of collaborative, discussion-based learning activities as an alternative to assessment formats that respondents felt invited shortcuts. These suggestions align closely with recommendations found elsewhere in the literature (Olawale & Ibrahim, 2024)

Recommendations

- i. Universities offering e-learning, particularly open and distance learning institutions such as NOUN, should embed structured, assessed instruction in citation practice, copyright literacy, and digital research ethics within the early undergraduate curriculum rather than treating these as optional orientation content.
- ii. Academic libraries should take a lead role, in partnership with faculties, in delivering recurring information literacy workshops specifically targeted at the citation and copyright gaps identified in this study, since librarians possess the relevant professional competence in source evaluation and intellectual property awareness.
- iii. Institutions should expand legitimate, low-cost or subsidised access to licensed digital textbooks, journal databases, and academic software, since a meaningful share of the copyright and software piracy documented here was directly linked by respondents to affordability rather than indifference to the law.
- iv. Where remote-proctoring or plagiarism-detection technologies are introduced to address examination misconduct, institutions should pair their deployment with transparent communication to students about how their data will be used, to balance the legitimate goal of deterrence against equally legitimate concerns about privacy.
- v. Institutions should diversify assessment formats away from a sole reliance on single, high-stakes, easily shared examination questions, toward formats such as reflective portfolios, oral assessments, and collaborative projects that are both harder to plagiarise or share dishonestly and more representative of genuine learning.
- vi. Anonymous, accessible reporting mechanisms should be established to allow students to report observed unethical conduct among peers without fear of social reprisal, supporting a broader institutional culture of accountability.

Conclusion

The current study investigated the Undergraduate students' perceptions of ethical issue of plagiarism, and copyright infringement associated with the use of e-Learning platforms in Gwagwalada study centre of the National Open University of Nigeria. The results indicate that although students generally support honesty in academic work, there were various forms of academic cheating that occurred under low levels of academic accountability, such as incorrect citations for plagiarized content, peer plagiarism, academic cheating in an online setting, and software piracy, which was largely driven by unauthorised sharing of the software. Ethical lapses in e-learning therefore appear shaped as much by economic pressure, weak enforcement, and inadequate training as by moral indifference. Addressing them requires sustained investment in citation and copyright education, affordable access to licensed resources, and assessment designs that reduce the incentive to cheat, rather than reliance on rules and sanctions alone.

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