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# Aligning Academic Integrity Policy and Practice in Postgraduate Studies: A Focused Analysis on Contract Cheating

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## ABSTRACT

The evolving landscape of tertiary education, shaped by technological advancements, commercialisation, internationalisation and pedagogical shifts, has intensified concerns regarding academic misconduct. In response, institutions have developed academic integrity policies to safeguard educational standards; however, the effectiveness of these policies hinges on their practical implementation. While prior studies have examined academic integrity frameworks, many focus predominantly on traditional forms of misconduct, such as plagiarism, without adequately considering the complexities of how linguistic ambiguity, fragmented policy structures, and stakeholder accessibility impact compliance and enforcement in postgraduate education. This study seeks to fill this gap by critically evaluating the extent to which a Ghanaian university's academic integrity policy aligns with contemporary challenges, particularly contract cheating. By benchmarking institutional policies against Bretag et al.'s academic integrity policy exemplar and Perkins and Roe's technological explicitness framework. Through a qualitative case study approach of content analysis, the research explores the extent to which contract cheating is addressed within existing policy structures, highlighting definitional ambiguities, accessibility challenges, and stakeholder engagement deficiencies. Findings underscore a persistent policy-practice gap, exacerbated by fragmented institutional responses and the increasing prevalence of essay mills. This study advocates for an integrated, linguistically inclusive, and technologically responsive policy framework that aligns with contemporary academic integrity challenges in postgraduate education, ensuring sustained compliance and ethical scholarship in the digital era.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the landscape of tertiary education has undergone a significant transformation, driven by technological advancements, evolving pedagogical practices, commercialisation, internationalisation and increasing cases of academic cheating. These developmental challenges, particularly the rise of academic misconduct, have prompted educational institutions to respond by developing and implementing 'bespoke' academic integrity policies to curb such practices. These policies serve as 'guiding principles' and typically encompass a range of strategies, including establishing clear definitions of academic misconduct, implementing preventative measures, and providing support for students struggling with

academic integrity issues. Accordingly, a well-formulated policy should comprehensively encompass the responsibilities of all stakeholders, the principles of integrity education, the protocols for investigating suspected cases, the identification of violations, the application of sanctions, and the implementation of restorative justice. In addition, it should address pedagogical approaches, assessment design, training, and other pertinent components. However, the effectiveness of these policies is often contingent upon their practical application. The fundamental question is how practicable, reasonable and responsive these policies are to academic integrity values, with a demonstrable alignment between policy and practice. This has sparked a thorough evaluation of academic integrity policies and their application within educational communities as they endeavour to maintain standards of honesty and fairness in an era characterised by unparalleled access to online resources and services, further complicated by a pervasive youth-sharing culture and the presence of essay-mill service providers.

Bretag et al. argue that policy and practice are central to an effective academic integrity culture.[1] Similarly, East, as cited by Bretag et al., persuasively argues that universities must integrate policy and educational practices in the context of decision-making and review processes to inculcate academic integrity among their students.[2] Stoesz et al. posit that a regular evaluation of institutional policies is crucial to policy practice, and by extension, there is a link between policy implementation and the pervasiveness of unethical practices in tertiary education.[3]

Among a litany of challenges confronting contemporary tertiary education, contract cheating has emerged as a growing concern, perhaps because of its pervasiveness and elusiveness to technological detection. This substantially threatens the integrity of educational qualifications and the ethical foundations of scholarship.[4] The implications of contract cheating extend far beyond individual cases of academic misconduct; they challenge the essence of educational values and the role of academic institutions in fostering a culture of integrity. Postgraduate education is characterised by an emphasis on independent research, critical thinking, and the development of professional competencies and is particularly vulnerable to these challenges. The stakes are high; the integrity of postgraduate qualifications is influencing not only the careers of individual students but also the credibility of the institutions that confer these degrees. As such, academic integrity policies must not only be established but also effectively implemented to maintain policy compliance in combating the rising tide of academic misconduct. This necessitates a comprehensive approach that encompasses clear policies, practical implementation strategies, and an unwavering dedication to cultivating an ethical culture in teaching and learning.

The rationale for this study is to review the institutional 'integrity policy' of a Ghanaian university, benchmarking it against Bretag et al.'s influential exemplary academic integrity policy and the concept of technological explicitness in examining the existing frameworks and policies designed by the university to guide teaching, learning, assessment, and research.[5] This study evaluates how the current policy addresses contract cheating as a threat to academic integrity. It explores contemporaneous and practical interpretations of relevant content, i.e. terminology used, the context of the policy, and its intended goals. The study also highlights students' challenges regarding awareness, accessibility, understanding, and perceptions of these policies. These factors may influence students' compliance with institutional policies or a lack of them may become motivators for cheating.[6] Despite the laudable objectives of institutional integrity policies, one of the core challenges in implementing them is the lack of a cohesive approach that involves all stakeholders in the educational process. To address this challenge,

[1] Tracey Bretag et al., "Core Elements of Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy in Australian Higher Education," *International Journal for Educational Integrity* 7, no. 2 (2011).

[2] Bretag et al., "Core Elements of Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy in Australian Higher Education."

[3] Brenda M Stoesz et al., "Academic Integrity and Contract Cheating Policy Analysis of Colleges in Ontario, Canada," *International Journal for Educational Integrity* 15, no. 1 (2019): 1–18.

[4] Thomas Lancaster, "Addressing Contract Cheating Through Staff-Student Partnerships," in *Contract Cheating in Higher Education* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 219–32, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12680-2_15.

[5] Bretag et al., "Core Elements of Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy in Australian Higher Education."

[6] Reuben Agbelengor Glover, Cyril Senyo Kpodo, and Selasi Awusi Sosu, "Contract Cheating 'Pseudepigraphy'. A Cardinal Sin in Higher Education? A Phenomenological Narrative of Andragogical Experiences, Insights and Reflections," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, 5 no.16 (December 24, 2024): 3140–56, https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.202451636.

institutions must provide resources and support for students, including workshops on academic writing, time management, and stress reduction. By fostering an environment that prioritises integrity and accountability, institutions can foster a culture of academic excellence rooted in integrity.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review presents a structured synopsis of research on academic integrity policies in tertiary education. By synthesising insights from various studies, it highlights key contributions, identifies critical areas for further exploration, informs future research directions and deepens the understanding and discourse on academic integrity policy. Ultimately, it emphasises the need to align policy and practice in education.[7]

In tertiary education, academic integrity is a fundamental cornerstone, reinforced through an unwavering dedication to six cardinal principles: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage, as espoused by the International Centre for Academic Integrity (ICAI).[8] These values are the cardinal principles underpinning academic institutions' credibility, accountability and reliability, ensuring that the pursuit of knowledge and the dissemination of information are conducted with the highest standards of honesty and ethicality. The commitment to the six cardinal principles is at the heart of academic integrity, [9] and the pursuit of educational excellence within learning communities. Unfortunately, the prevalence of contract cheating in postgraduate education is gradually eroding the foundations of academic integrity in research. Therefore, as part of a university's commitment to excellence in teaching, learning, research and knowledge promotion and to remain a hub of integrity in the pursuit of excellence, it must commit itself to respectable academic integrity policies to guide its mission and intellectual enterprise. On the contrary, its absence could injure institutional credibility and reputation.[10] Because institutional academic integrity policy serves as the guiding conscience for the collective will, expectations and responsibilities of members for the common good of their university community and the country in general. Similarly, as a "multi-dimensional" educational enterprise, faculty, administrators, librarians, researchers, non-teaching staff, learners and stakeholders are the enablers.[11]

A good policy, therefore, not only guides and promotes ethical scholarship but could also serve as a deterrent to curbing academic misconduct if it is readily accessible and effectively communicated to the target audience.[12] Policy awareness is key and should not be perceived as a 'white elephant' or a mere "window dressing."[13] Whereas developing institutional academic integrity policy is laudable, policy alone cannot be the panacea to curbing academic misconduct.[14] In fact, it is the starting point for fostering a culture of academic integrity.[15] Indeed, it is the actualisation of a policy in practice that promotes integrity in a learning community. A coherent policy, underpinned by purpose and values, consistently enforced impartially and with zeal, deters unethical behaviour by members. However, a major concern is the implementation gaps between policies and practices (the discrepancies between the planned and actual performance of the policy). Ideally, aligning these two aspects is crucial for cultivating an academic integrity culture. Mahmud and Bretag citing Bretag et al., report on inconsistency in how

[7] Bretag et al., "Core Elements of Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy in Australian Higher Education."

[8] International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI), "The Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity." (3rd Ed.)," 2021, http://www.academicintegrity.org/the-fundamental-values of academic integrity.

[9] Jen Simonds and Ceceilia Parnther, "Honesty," in *What Is Academic Integrity?* (2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 United States: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2022), https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071887240.

[10] Beatriz Antonieta Moya and Sarah Elaine Eaton, "Academic Integrity Policy Analysis of Chilean Universities," *Journal of Academic Ethics* 22, no. 4 (December 28, 2024): 639–63, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-024-09515-w.

[11] Bretag et al., "Core Elements of Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy in Australian Higher Education."

[12] Antoni Cerdà-Navarro et al., "Academic Integrity Policies against Assessment Fraud in Postgraduate Studies: An Analysis of the Situation in Spanish Universities," *Heliyon* 8, no. 3 (March 2022): e09170, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e09170.

[13] Tomáš Foltýnek and Irene Glendinning, "Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe: Results of the Project," *Acta Universitatis Agriculturae et Silviculturae Mendelianae Brunensis* 63, no. 1 (April 1, 2015): 207–16, https://doi.org/10.11118/actaun201563010207; Stoesz et al., "Academic Integrity and Contract Cheating Policy Analysis of Colleges in Ontario, Canada."

[14] Bretag et al., "Core Elements of Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy in Australian Higher Education."

[15] Moya and Eaton, "Academic Integrity Policy Analysis of Chilean Universities."

university integrity policies are presented and responded to in policy documents. A similar study conducted in the US and Canada identified "variation in the treatment of research integrity issues" despite the presence of essential policy elements.[16] Although academic integrity policies are generally for all university members, most commonly, the lens is on student misconduct.

The concept of integrity in scholarship is referred to by various terminologies, such as 'academic integrity,' 'research ethics,' research integrity,' and 'scientific integrity.' These terms are often used interchangeably in institutional research policy documents. Although they may appear similar, they are not the same.[17] The semantics make their specific meanings obfuscating and challenging to distinguish. Despite the nomenclature used, they all pertain to ethicality in scholarship with differences in scope. In this study, academic integrity policy refers to any document designed to address and guide ethical issues in research. It equally refers to the aspirational ethical code that governs academic conduct. Moreover, it emphasises honesty in scholarship, a commitment to the quality of work, and the importance of acknowledging the contributions of others. This is against the backdrop that the fundamental essence of 'policy' is to guide and foster a culture of academic integrity within a learning community.[18]

In the literature, there is an emerging body of research on academic integrity policy analysis,[19] most of these are grounded on the foundational theories of researchers like East, Tennant, Rowell, Duggan and Bretag et al.[20] These researchers laid the groundwork and, by extension, were instrumental in shaping contemporary understandings of academic integrity policy in education. For example, based on East's "checklist for an aligned approach to implementing academic integrity," Bretag et al. theorised their influential work of "five core elements of exemplary academic integrity policy, categorised as Access, Approach, Responsibility, Detail, and Support." A theory which has since been relied on by many researchers, including Moya and Eaton, Appiah et al., Yankova, Perkins and Roe, Stoesz and Eaton, Miron et al., Mahmud and Bretag, in their various studies. Perkins and Roe introduced a sixth element of technological explicitness, i.e. the impact of evolving technologies on academic integrity and, by extension, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the interplay between academic ethicality and generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). [21]

This technological evolution calls for the reconceptualisation of academic integrity policies to reflect technological advancements and societal values. Students question, disapprove of, and redefine what constitutes cheating and unethical behaviour in their world. They, therefore, struggle to accept the traditional concept of academic cheating. According to Glover, Kpodo, and Sosu, these disagreements have led to the "use of a variety of neutralisation techniques such as rationalisation, denial, deflecting blame to others, condemning the accusers by cheaters to justify their dishonest behaviour."[22] The situation has been further exacerbated by the challenges posed by COVID-19 and its domino effects on traditional modes of instruction and assessment, particularly with the shift to online learning and virtual lectures as the new normal. While these teaching modules offer flexible learning opportunities in tertiary education, they have attracted market reactions from unscrupulous contract-cheating service providers (essay mills) whose illegal services have reduced tertiary education into a transactional enterprise rather than fostering genuine effort and learning among students.

## Contract Cheating Defined

[16] Saadia Mahmud and Tracey Bretag, "Postgraduate Research Students and Academic Integrity: 'It's about Good Research Training,'" *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 35, no. 4 (August 2013): 432–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2013.812178.

[17] David Appiah, Jamal-Deen Majeed Duut, and Comfort Adu-Gyebi, "Public Availability of Research Integrity Policies in Leading African Universities," *Journal of Academic Ethics*, January 24, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-025-09600-8.

[18] Mahmud and Bretag, "Postgraduate Research Students and Academic Integrity: 'It's about Good Research Training.'"

[19] Appiah, Duut, and Adu-Gyebi, "Public Availability of Research Integrity Policies in Leading African Universities."

[20] Julianne East, "Aligning Policy and Practice: An Approach to Integrating Academic Integrity," *Journal of Academic Language and Learning* 3, no. 1 (2009): A38–51.

[21] Mike Perkins and Jasper Roe, "Decoding Academic Integrity Policies: A Corpus Linguistics Investigation of AI and Other Technological Threats," *Higher Education Policy* 37, no. 3 (September 17, 2024): 633–53, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-023-00323-2.

[22] Glover, Kpodo, and Sosu, "Contract Cheating 'Pseudepigraphy'. A Cardinal Sin in Higher Education? A Phenomenological Narrative of Andragogical Experiences, Insights and Reflections."

To start with, it is important to define contract cheating and explore its various manifestations, as this understanding is vital for addressing the issue. Clarke and Lancaster, pioneers in contract cheating research coined the term and defined it as the unethical practice of students submitting work for academic credit that has been written by hired contractors.[23] Following their initial definition of contract cheating, varying definitions have emerged because of ongoing research and continued studies. As pointed out by Amigud and Lancaster, Clarke and Lancaster, some definitions are arbitrary and often mix various forms of academic misconduct.[24] Other definitions have been developed to incorporate commercial and non-commercial contract cheating, defining it as a transactional practice with a service provider (essay mills). Some scholars highlighted the relational involvement of third parties, including family and friends, peers, or staff members.[25] Foltýnek et al. recently introduced generative AI (GenAI) into the concept.[26] This raises important questions about normalising cognitive offloading to generative AI (GenAI) in tertiary education. In a review of definitional challenges of contract cheating, Ullah introduced a new phrase of a cheater submitting commissioned work as his effort "with or without an understanding of the content."[27] Although advertised essay mill providers offer their services for fees, research suggests that the local services may not necessarily be monetary transactions; they may include non-cash exchanges, i.e. favours, forbearance, bartering or gratis. Contract cheating can take many forms, including hiring ghostwriters, purchasing pre-written essays, or employing online services to complete student assignments.[28]

Lancaster argues that social media facilitates contract cheating by driving a thriving black-market trade in contract-cheating services.[29] The anonymity and accessibility of the internet have facilitated the proliferation of these services, making it increasingly easy for students to engage in dishonest practices. This accessibility raises critical questions about the motivations of contract cheating service providers and the students who 'patronise' them. Whereas technology's role in facilitating and combating contract cheating cannot be overlooked, human vigilance is paramount. While the internet has made it easier for students to engage in dishonest practices, it has also provided tools for educators to detect and address academic misconduct. However, the reliance on technology alone is insufficient; institutions must adopt a holistic approach that combines technological solutions with educational initiatives aimed at cultivating a culture of integrity.

Research indicates that factors such as academic pressure, time constraints, and a lack of confidence in one's abilities often compel students to seek external assistance, thereby undermining their educational experience and the value of their qualifications.[30] Scholars have recommended many solutions to contract cheating, such as quasi-judicial measures, technological interventions, and educational strategies.

As the landscape of postgraduate studies continues to evolve, institutions must remain vigilant to uphold academic integrity. By addressing the complexities of contract cheating and prioritising academic integrity, institutions can safeguard the value of graduate qualifications and ensure that they continue to serve as a credible measure of student achievement and professional competence.

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[23] Robert Clarke and Thomas Lancaster, "Eliminating the Successor to Plagiarism? Identifying the Usage of Contract Cheating Sites," in *Proceedings of 2nd International Plagiarism Conference*, 2006, 19–21.

[24] Alexander Amigud and Thomas Lancaster, "246 Reasons to Cheat: An Analysis of Students' Reasons for Seeking to Outsource Academic Work," *Computers & Education* 134 (June 2019): 98–107, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2019.01.017.

[25] Rebecca Awdry and Bob Ives, "Students Cheat More Often from Those Known to Them: Situation Matters More than the Individual," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 46, no. 8 (November 17, 2021): 1254–68, https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2020.1851651; Bretag et al., "Core Elements of Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy in Australian Higher Education."

[26] Foltýnek and Glendinning, "Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe: Results of the Project."

[27] Shah Neyamat Ullah, "A New Revised Definition of Contract Cheating," in *2020 IEEE Global Engineering Education Conference (EDUCON)* (IEEE, 2020), 1478–82, https://doi.org/10.1109/EDUCON45650.2020.9125118.

[28] Loreta Tauginienė et al., "Glossary for Academic Integrity," 2022.

[29] Thomas Lancaster, "Social Media Enabled Contract Cheating," *Canadian Perspectives on Academic Integrity* 2, no. 2 (2019): 7–24.

[30] Glover, Kpodo, and Sosu, "Contract Cheating 'Pseudepigraphy'. A Cardinal Sin in Higher Education? A Phenomenological Narrative of Andragogical Experiences, Insights and Reflections."

As noted by Lancaster and Clarke, although many interventions to combat cheating have been proposed, there is a dearth of research on the role of university policies in the contract cheating debate.[31] This requires not only the development of robust policies but also a commitment to ongoing evaluation and adaptation. Universities should regularly evaluate and revise their academic integrity policies and practices, seeking feedback from students and faculty to identify areas for improvement and revitalisation. There is a clarion call for higher education to reconceptualise academic cheating in the era of generative AI (GenAI). Furthermore, collaboration with external organisations and stakeholders can provide valuable insights and resources to enhance the effectiveness of integrity initiatives.

## Academic Integrity in Context

As cited by Bretag et al., Freeman defines "institutional policy" as "formal statements of principle which provide the overarching rationale for actions, procedures, or operations."[32] which are operationalised by regulations and procedures. In other words, academic integrity policies are the guiding principles for ethical practices in education and research. As such, "universities must align policy with teaching and learning practices for practical impact."[33] Tauginienė et al., as cited in Eaton define academic integrity as: "Compliance with ethical and professional principles, standards, practices and a consistent system of values, that serves as guidance for making decisions and taking actions in education, research and scholarship" (European Network for Academic Integrity, ENAI).[34] The catchword is 'compliance' and without it, policy is ineffective. Noncompliance with ethical standards is considered misconduct, with common breaches including plagiarism, cheating, falsification of data, and unauthorised collaboration.

Institutions develop academic integrity policies that outline expectations and consequences to combat noncompliance or transgressions. Research suggests institutional integrity policies serve as canons in legal actions involving the institution and members of the learning community.[35] Interestingly, institutional policies are not only for teaching and learning; they may serve as legal documents referable in litigation. Therefore, faculty, staff, and students must be conversant with the dictates of these policies and comply. This reality emphasises the importance of active participation from all stakeholders, particularly faculty, staff, and students, in formulating, implementing and evaluating these policies.[36]

As anticipated, many publicly funded universities in Ghana have established institutional policies that guide teaching, learning, and research; however, many face challenges in enforcement, adherence, and compliance. Additionally, university authorities have implemented various regulations, rules, and procedures aimed at promoting acceptable academic principles and standards. Nonetheless, significant misalignments between policy and practice persist due to factors such as insufficient awareness, inadequate training and education, inconsistent enforcement, and a lack of supportive systems. These implementation gaps are a growing concern for all stakeholders. As a result, the study of academic integrity policy in education has garnered significant attention in recent years, leading to a burgeoning body of literature that explores various dimensions of the subject. This literature review aims to synthesise key findings and theoretical frameworks from existing literature through a comprehensive overview of accessible knowledge in this field. While many existing studies focus on theoretical frameworks or specific aspects of academic integrity, this research emphasises empirical content analysis and the practical accessibility of policies, approaches, stakeholder responsibilities, available support mechanisms and pragmatic alignment of policy and practice in a Ghanaian university.

The empirical literature on academic integrity policy is rich and varied. A notable trend in the literature is the increasing focus on compliance or infringement of academic integrity policies in education. For example, in their respective edited works, "First and Second Handbook of Academic

[31] Thomas Lancaster and Robert Clarke, "Contract Cheating: The Outsourcing of Assessed Student Work," 2016.

[32] Bretag et al., "Core Elements of Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy in Australian Higher Education."

[33] Bretag et al., "Core Elements of Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy in Australian Higher Education."

[34] Sarah Elaine Eaton, "Global Perspectives on Academic Integrity: Introduction," in *Springer International Handbooks of Education* (Springer Cham, 2024), 17–21, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-54144-5_83.

[35] Tracey Bretag, "Defining Academic Integrity: International Perspectives – Introduction," in *Handbook of Academic Integrity* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2016), 3–5, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-098-8_76.

[36] Tricia Bertram Gallant, "Academic Integrity in the Twenty-First Century: A Teaching and Learning Imperative. ASHE Higher Education Report, Volume 33, Number 5.," *ASHE Higher Education Report* 33, no. 5 (2008): 1–143.

Integrity," Bretag Tracy and Sarah Elaine Eaton assemble a range of global perspectives from experts to provide an in-depth overview of academic integrity by exploring its complexities and manifestations.[37] They also recommend strategies for fostering ethical academic environments amidst a rising tide of academic misconduct.[38]

Again, the researcher drew on existing literature and policy analysis from various countries, including Australia, the United Kingdom, the USA, and Canada, to enrich the literature review and contextualise the findings. Miron Jennie et al., citing Stoesz et al. report that contract cheating was specifically missing in the lexicon of academic integrity policies of publicly funded Ontario Colleges and Western Canadian Universities. [39] Furthermore, their findings revealed poorly explained policy definitions and inadequate support mechanisms in these learning communities.

In Africa, tertiary education faces integrity challenges, especially with the rise of online learning and the demand for sustainable educational practices. These challenges have been further exacerbated by the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and the swift transition to e-learning. These drastic realignments revealed vulnerabilities in existing academic practices that must be addressed. A recent study by Appiah, Majeed Duut, and Adu-Gyebi indicates that many African universities lack documented research integrity policies.[40] Their findings revealed that "only 20.67% have accessible research integrity policies, with significant gaps, particularly in Northern and Central Africa." This finding aligns with broader concerns noted in other literature regarding the underdevelopment of research governance in various regions, particularly under-represented areas like Northern and Central Africa. Additionally, the study's attention to the implications of language use in policy documents reflects ongoing discussions about inclusivity and alignment with global research norms, echoing sentiments found in other academic integrity research. Although the statistics call for concern regarding research governance and ethicality in scholarship in Africa, they also serve as a clarion call to action by providing a nuanced, region-specific analysis that underscores the need for targeted interventions to improve policy acceptance and implementation across the continent.

On the other hand, Australia, the UK, the USA, South America, and Canada abound with research, best practices, and quality assurance governance systems for academic integrity.[41] For example, in Australia, the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (the Code).[42] *The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency* (TEQSA) and the *Australian Universities Quality Agency* (AUQA)[43] *Higher Education Academy* (HEA)[44] in the UK, the Canadian Tri-Agency Framework on Responsible Conduct of Research and the US Presidential Memorandum on Scientific Integrity.[45]

This study is situated within the context of postgraduate research policies at a Ghanaian university while borrowing from other policy analysis studies by academic integrity scholars around the globe. Mahmud and Bretag, Chanock, Gilmore et al. call into question the presumption that postgraduate students possess previous knowledge of research ethics. They maintain that they mostly come relatively 'unschooled' in ethics.[46] In like manner, Bretag et al., stated that Australian postgraduate research

[37] Bretag, "Defining Academic Integrity: International Perspectives – Introduction."

[38] Sarah Elaine Eaton, "Global Perspectives on Academic Integrity: Introduction," in *"Second Handbook of Academic Integrity." Springer International Handbooks of Education.* (Switzerland : Springer, Cham. , 2024), 17–21, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-54144-5_83.

[39] Jennie Miron et al., "Academic Integrity Policy Analysis of Publicly-Funded Universities in Ontario, Canada: A Focus on Contract Cheating," *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, no. 197 (2021): 62–75.

[40] Appiah, Duut, and Adu-Gyebi, "Public Availability of Research Integrity Policies in Leading African Universities."

[41] Moya and Eaton, "Academic Integrity Policy Analysis of Chilean Universities."

[42] Mahmud and Bretag, "Postgraduate Research Students and Academic Integrity: 'It's about Good Research Training.'"

[43] Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), *TEQSA Guidance Note: Academic Integrity. TEQSA*, 2019; Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), "Audits: Universities," 2010, http://www.auqa.edu.au/qualityaudit/universities/..

[44] Higher Education Academy (HEA), " Policy Works: Recommendations for Reviewing Policy to Manage Unacceptable Academic Practice in Higher Education," The Academy JISC Academic Integrity Service, The Higher Education Academy, UK., 2011, http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/academicintegrity/policy_works.

[45] "The White House Memorandum of March 9, 2009: Scientific Integrity. ," *Fed Reg* 74, no. 46 (2009): 10671–248. E. Morris and J. Carroll, "Policy Works-Recommendations for Reviewing Policy to Manage Unacceptable Academic Practice in Higher Education," *Higher Education Academy, UK*, 2011.

[46] Mahmud and Bretag, "Postgraduate Research Students and Academic Integrity: 'It's about Good Research Training.'"

students are dissatisfied with inadequate education on how to keep academic integrity violations at bay.[47] Again, in another study, Mahmud and Bretag found inconsistencies in the definition of research misconduct and a lack of adequate detail and support in integrity policies for postgraduate 'research trainees.'[48] Although there is a growing body of academic integrity policy analysis research in the literature, mainly emanating from Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the USA, Canada and China, Africa is underrepresented in the debate.[49]

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The literature is daunted with several theoretical frameworks and approaches to elucidate the complexities of academic integrity policy.[50] Bretag and Mahmud developed an 8-step policy cycle, i.e. identification, policy analysis, policy instruments, consultation, coordination, decision, implementation and evaluation. They further suggest that policy should be informed by empirical evidence, insights, and operational challenges, and stakeholders should be made policy participants, not recipients because consultation is key to policy development. Their framework contributed to the debate on aligning academic integrity policy and practice. In another study, Foltýnek et al. used the "Academic Integrity Maturity Model (AIMM)" to explore the impact of plagiarism policies on European higher education institutions.[51] Stoesz explains that research on academic integrity policies is often based on two theoretical frameworks: problem-solving theory and critical theory, which are underpinned by multiple epistemological foundations.[52] While many existing studies focus on theoretical frameworks or specific aspects of academic integrity, this research emphasises empirical content analysis.

Specifically, this study adopts the theoretical and philosophical stance espoused by Bretag et al., employing their framework to critically analyse the integrity policies of the university under focus. It examines how these policies align with practical effectiveness and adaptability to the "core elements of exemplary academic integrity policy," in fostering ethical scholarship.[53]

**Access:** The effectiveness of a policy hinges on its clarity, readability, and logical structure, complete with relevant links to resources. Ultimately, policy accessibility, downloadability and printability via an official institutional website enhance its credibility, visibility and reliability.

**Approach:** This refers to a defined purpose, principles and values systematically aligned with policy direction and strategy, i.e. educative, punitive or hybrid approaches with a genuine commitment to fostering academic integrity.

**Responsibility:** This element outlines shared responsibility among members and stakeholders of a learning community, i.e. faculty, non-teaching staff, students and stakeholders. Each member's rights and obligations are specified. This ensures clarity of purpose among members and stakeholders of a learning community.

**Support:** This outlines the available support mechanisms such as professional development activities, in-service training, workshops, seminars, conferences, resources, tools and procedures to facilitate policy implementation and compliance. It incorporates an action plan to enhance engagement, awareness and understanding of the policy among faculty, staff, students, and stakeholders.

**Detail:** This refers to policy specifics without ambiguities or 'lacunas', such as using general definitions to describe unethical academic behaviours and the needless use of obfuscating legal jargon. The document must explicitly define objective outcomes, ethicality, violations, and levels of severity classified in comprehensible language, reporting, recording, confidentiality, procedures, prescribed punitive measures, decisions and the appeals process available to the accused.

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[47] Bretag et al., "Core Elements of Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy in Australian Higher Education."

[48] Bretag et al., "Core Elements of Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy in Australian Higher Education."

[49] Ami Möller, "An Analysis of University Academic Integrity Policies in New Zealand," *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 47, no. 3 (March 16, 2023): 338–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2022.2130195.

[50] Gallant, "Academic Integrity in the Twenty-First Century: A Teaching and Learning Imperative. ASHE Higher Education Report, Volume 33, Number 5."

[51] Foltýnek and Glendinning, "Impact of Policies for Plagiarism in Higher Education Across Europe: Results of the Project."

[52] Brenda M. Stoesz and Sarah Elaine Eaton, "Academic Integrity Policies of Publicly Funded Universities in Western Canada," *Educational Policy* 36, no. 6 (September 23, 2022): 1529–48, https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904820983032.

[53] Bretag et al., "Core Elements of Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy in Australian Higher Education."

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, employing qualitative content analysis to examine academic integrity policies at a Ghanaian university. Case study research, as outlined by Creswell,[54] enables an in-depth exploration of institutional frameworks in their real-world context. Following Schreier's [55] methodological principles, qualitative content analysis identifies thematic patterns, conceptual ambiguities, and institutional gaps concerning contract cheating and generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). While this approach offers contextual depth and flexibility, allowing for theoretical development and validation, there are limitations. Findings are not broadly generalisable, given the specificity of the case, and the potential for researcher bias necessitates reflexivity in interpretation. Nonetheless, this method provides valuable insights into the intersection of policy and practice, advancing academic integrity discourse in postgraduate education. That said, the study is further guided by Bretag et al.'s[56] academic integrity policy exemplar, which outlines foundational elements of effective integrity policies, and Perkins and Roe's[57] technological explicitness framework. The study interrogates the extent to which institutional policies account for technological advancements in academic misconduct. It also examined the disconnect between policy and practice while highlighting how constructive alignment could be used to foster a learning environment where there is consistency in dealing with contract cheating. By employing Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach,[58] the study systematically codes and categorises policy documents to evaluate their clarity, accessibility, and alignment with contemporary academic integrity challenges. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and ethical considerations, the university under review is de-identified or anonymised in the study and hereinafter referred to as 'the university.'

In addition to policy document analysis, this study integrates stakeholder perspectives, incorporating insights from faculty, administrators, and colleague postgraduate students. To some extent, the author's experiences as a PhD student, combined with the relevant literature, inform this study. This methodological triangulation aligns with Stoesz et al.'s[59] argument that stakeholder engagement is instrumental in shaping policy efficacy and fostering institutional compliance. Furthermore, East, as cited by Bretag et al.,[60] underscores the necessity of embedding academic integrity within pedagogical and decision-making frameworks to promote ethical scholarship.

### Academic Integrity Policy Analysis

Research activities in tertiary education institutions are directed by specific policies, which serve as guidelines and codes of ethics that every member can relate to for knowledge production and promotion.[61] As a matter of course, policies are essential for the advancement of the mission and strategic objectives of the institutions. Academic integrity is one vital policy that serves as the ethical or moral code, which seeks to protect the reputation and integrity of the scholarly activities by faculty, administrators and students.

To that extent, most tertiary institutions publish their policies on their official websites (online) or in student handbooks to guide students and their supervisors in their academic enterprises. These policies serve as guidelines for academic excellence with integrity. Whereas these principles guard against all forms of academic misconduct, e.g., plagiarism, contract cheating, and fabrication, among

[54] John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches, 5th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018).

[55] Margrit Schreier, Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2012), https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529682571.

[56] Bretag et al., "Core Elements of Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy in Australian Higher Education."

[57] Mike Perkins and Jasper Roe, "Decoding Academic Integrity Policies: A Corpus Linguistics Investigation of AI and Other Technological Threats," *Higher Education Policy* 37, no. 3 (September 17, 2024): 633–53, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-023-00323-2.

[58] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide (London: SAGE Publications, 2021), https://books.google.ch/books?id=eMArEAAAQBAJ.

[59] Brenda M. Stoesz et al., "Academic Integrity and Contract Cheating Policy Analysis of Colleges in Ontario, Canada," International Journal for Educational Integrity 15, no. 1 (2019): 1–18, https://edintegrity.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1007/s40979-019-0042-4.

[60] Bretag et al., "Core Elements of Exemplary Academic Integrity Policy in Australian Higher Education."

[61] Donald L. McCabe, Linda Klebe Trevino, and Kenneth D. Butterfield, "Cheating in Academic Institutions: A Decade of Research," *Ethics & Behavior* 11, no. 3 (July 2001): 219–32, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327019EB1103_2.

others, on the other hand, they guide the production of authentic scholarly works in the spirit of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility and courage.[62] While there are policy exemplars or conceptual models to guide integrity policy formulation, many institutional policies do not meet the standards espoused in the models. Put in context, a well-crafted policy, when effectively implemented, deters unethical behaviour in a learning community. To that effect, this review is premised on the concept that a well-developed policy is only one part of the process; without a cohesive approach to promoting academic integrity that aligns policy and practice, universities will struggle to create ethical academies.[63]

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Although the university under study maintains a range of policies, it lacks a unified, purpose-crafted policy document that systematically articulates both the conceptual foundations and practical applications of academic integrity. A review of institutional documentation did not yield a singular, comprehensive policy titled "Integrity Policy. Instead, relevant content is scattered across multiple documents with diverse titles, making it difficult to locate, read and understand their cumulative effect. Although the retrieval process was easy, one document was unprintable. Whereas the publication dates are indicated in the policy documents, there were no proposed scheduled review dates to ensure policy responsiveness to emerging unethical practices. The absence of a cyclical policy review regime makes the policies static and obsolete. Best practices suggest a five-year cyclical policy review to keep policies relevant and current.[64]

The policy leans heavily on a punitive approach, focusing on what constitutes violations and unethical behaviour by all members by outlining levels of severity of transgressions, and ramifications, and prescribing punitive and disciplinary actions when found guilty as charged. It is more cautionary in language and regulatory than educative.

Further findings indicate that retrieved policy documents outline the rights and obligations of all members in promoting and upholding academic honesty and integrity within the university. However, in practice, students are often perceived as the main offenders, while faculty and administrators usually assume the roles of the 'academic police,' responsible for enforcing sanctions.

Even more concerning is the observation that parts of the documents are written in 'confusing' legal legalese (legal jargon), making them baffling and incomprehensible to students. For instance, general definitions are used to describe diverse academic integrity infractions without providing interpretations. Conspicuously missing is the mention and definition of contract cheating as an unethical academic practice and how to avoid it. While these definitions and clauses operate as a catch-all (omnibus clauses) for terms and conduct not explicitly included in the policy, they somehow create lacunas, giving room for irrational interpretations and absurdities. Interestingly, punitive and disciplinary procedures are delineated in the document, as opposed to educational instruction on how to navigate integrity challenges. The policy generally lacks detailed or sufficient information to communicate and simplify the understanding of what constitutes academic misconduct and acceptable ethics in scholarship. The findings further indicate that the policy lacks support mechanisms for ethical decision-making by members confronted with ethical dilemmas. Also missing are guidelines for stakeholder engagement and development activities to facilitate policy implementation. To reinforce the regulations, instructions and templates are provided for students to follow under the watch of their supervisor in the final presentation of their theses for assessment. This creates room for discretionary application, which leads to arbitrariness.

## DISCUSSION

The policies of the university under review are scanty (not detailed) with scattered texts within different policy documents, making them difficult to locate, not easily accessible, and challenging to comprehend.

[62] International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI), "The Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity." (3rd Ed.)."

[63] East, "Aligning Policy and Practice: An Approach to Integrating Academic Integrity."

[64] Deepani B. Guruge and Rajan Kadel, "Towards an Holistic Framework to Mitigate and Detect Contract Cheating within an Academic Institute—A Proposal," *Education Sciences* 13, no. 2 (January 31, 2023): 148, https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13020148.

Nonetheless, this study attempts to combine a few such regulations for a combined effect analysis. Policies analysed revealed a lack of a single-concept title, making it difficult to find relevant policy locations. In aligning policy and practice, policy visibility and accessibility (online or print) to members of a learning community are key to policy awareness and transparency. However, difficulty accessing policy documents can be frustrating, forestalling, disconcerting and may lead to disengagement. 'The University's Research Policy (March 2010) document, section five, Scientific Misconduct, point 5.1, Procedures for Misconduct, states;

> *(a) "Every member of the University staff shall be responsible for ensuring a milieu which encourages academic honesty and integrity."*
> *(b) "For this policy (sic), scientific misconduct may be used interchangeably with research misconduct and may be defined as the practice of fabricating, falsifying and plagiarising (US Dept. of Health and Human Services Offices of Research Integrity, 2005). These include dishonest practices of conducting or reporting research that contradicts the accepted norms within the scientific community. Misinterpretations of findings that can be proven to be honest errors and not intent to deceive may not be considered misconduct."*

The document further provides rules for investigating misconduct and the prescribed punishments when one is found culpable. Although the policy states that ensuring academic honesty and integrity within the learning community is a shared responsibility of every member, there seems to be a strong focus on students' academic misconduct and the prescribed punitive measures throughout the document. Then again, there is a noticeable lack of interventions and mechanisms for fostering a culture of academic integrity. Instead, the policy seems to focus on policing and sanctioning students' breaches. While section (b) aims to define research misconduct as the practices of fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism, it serves as a catch-all for other dishonest practices that violate the principles of ethical scholarship within the scientific community. As a result, what constitutes dishonest practices can be subjective and open to varied interpretations and misunderstandings. Such obscurity creates room for misconceptions and interpretations of policy dos and don'ts. This does not align with the five core elements of exemplary academic integrity by Bretag et al.

The **Detail** element of the exemplar requires clear and precise definitions of terms, conduct, and practices without ambiguities. It states that the policy should detail practices that constitute dishonest behaviour in clear, comprehensible language. The presence of ambiguous language creates uncertainty or convolution about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable academic behaviour, which can lead to both unintended and intentional breaches. On the other hand, clear, explicit, and comprehensible language may facilitate standardised understanding among members, enabling them to "make more informed decisions about maintaining normative standards."[65] Explication of policy principles helps university community members navigate ethical dilemmas decisively and, indeed, promotes sound ethical reasoning. Despite the well-intentioned nature of these policies aimed at upholding credibility, fostering honest scholarship, and establishing ethical standards, there is a lamentable dearth of awareness and education on contract cheating. Whereas the authorities provide policy handbooks to students besides online publications, the question remains: Do students read their policy handbooks? Regrettably, some students do not read these materials to acquaint themselves with the rules in these documents. Subsequently, when they contravene these regulations, they quickly allege 'ignorance of the law' as a defence. Sadly, this defence is inadmissible. Whereas educators condemn such infractions as unethical, egregious, and unpardonable, it is repugnant when students attempt to justify them as a form of collaborative 'teamwork'. A self-serving rationalisation to absolve themselves of culpability. That explains why it is prudent for faculty to adopt an education-based approach to teaching members how to uphold and abide by the policy's provisions. This could be achieved through purposeful orientations and the inculcation of ethics in some academic subjects, especially thesis writing. Furthermore, including educational principles in policies provides members with a positive approach to academic integrity.

[65] Miron et al., "Academic Integrity Policy Analysis of Publicly-Funded Universities in Ontario, Canada: A Focus on Contract Cheating."

Again, adopting the educational approach of teaching and learning to policy implementation provides better support that empowers learners in making prudent ethical decisions on campus and beyond. As it were, an educated mind makes educated decisions. For it is said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is not an act, but a habit."[66] Similarly, Eaton, citing Hendricks and Quinn, posits that imbuing proper writing skills in students, like citing, referencing and good paraphrasing, empowers students "epistemologically."[67] Ultimately, it helps inculcate personal integrity values in the individual members of a learning community.

As a "multi-dimensional enterprise, academic integrity policy should include explication of principles, awareness creation, sensitisation, engagement, empowerment, prevention and enforcement.

In a similar policy document, ……. Statutes (December 2020), statute 80. Under the heading 'Discipline and Penalties', academic misconduct was highlighted as a punishable offence in the institution.

> "*Disciplinary Offences in the University shall be as prescribed in Rules 2 to 5 of Schedule F of the Statutes. Without prejudice to the generality of the offences prescribed in Rules 2 to 5 of Schedule F of the Statutes, disciplinary offences in the University shall include the following:*
> *d. Conduct which amounts to* ***plagiarism, academic cheating, dishonesty, misconduct, fraud, misrepresentation*** (emphasis mine) *not herein otherwise described in order to obtain academic credit or other academic advantage of any kind; and*
> *e. Conduct which, in the opinion of the University, brings the name of the University into disrepute."*

The specific mention of plagiarism, academic cheating, dishonesty, misconduct, fraud, and misrepresentation gives some degree of detail but is short of defining or describing these misconducts. What amounts to plagiarism and other listed misconducts may not be explicitly clear to some members, which creates definition gaps between "official definitions and personal interpretations." A deeper definition of each type of misconduct would have helped members have clear guidelines on what constitutes misconduct. Absent is the term contract cheating, which is a specific misconduct. Although indirectly, a 'caveat' derestricting misconduct practices, such broad or general expressions for varied misconduct do not promote clarity and detailed language. A practice Moya and Eaton refer to as "umbrella expressions."[68] Using the term Contract cheating with a definition would have enriched members' understanding of the unacceptability of third-party involvement in students' assessment tasks. Furthermore, the inclusion of the term would have provided members with insight into the detrimental effects of contract cheating on institutional reputation and individual academic credentials, highlighting the need to avoid it.

The "omnibus clause" in subsection (e), which indirectly delegates the determination of misconduct in broad terms to the authorities' discretion, is problematic. As humans, it could potentially lead to subjective interpretations and arbitrary decisions with serious repercussions if not managed prudently. Where discretionary power is "vested in any person or authority," there must be a common understanding of how it is exercised; thus, "discretionary power shall be deemed to imply a duty to be fair and candid; the exercise of the discretionary power shall not be arbitrary, capricious or biased whether by resentment, prejudice or personal dislike and shall be in accordance with due process of law."[69] Although society expects high ethical professional conduct by educators, it suffices to say that inconsistencies in how faculty understand, perceive and address academic integrity breaches leave much to be desired. The point is that granting vast discretionary power and inconsistencies in policy may lead to arbitrariness, capriciousness, inequitable, and unjust enforcement. The principle of administrative

[66] Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the World's Greatest Philosophers.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926).
[67] Sarah Elaine Eaton et al., "Contract Cheating: A Summative Look Back and a Path Forward," in *Contract Cheating in Higher Education* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 303–12, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12680-2_20.
[68] Moya and Eaton, "Academic Integrity Policy Analysis of Chilean Universities."
[69] *The Republican Constitution of Ghana, Article 296.* (Accra: Ghana Publishing Company/Assembly Press. , 1992).

justice through transparency and fairness in fostering an integrity culture cannot be overemphasised. It goes without saying that ethicality thrives when authorities act with integrity.

Whereas the policy dwells heavily on a punitive approach, it lacks well-defined principles and procedures for investigating alleged transgressions. Miron et al. explain that overreliance on punitive approaches generates acrimonious relationships and a "sense of tension and mistrust rather than collaboration."[70] A purposeful policy must have an approach that promotes a course of action to facilitate a culture of integrity that incentivises accountability and personal effort.

That aside, it is observed that the School of Graduate Studies (SGS), whose core mandate is to formulate and implement academic regulations and procedures in relation to postgraduate education, consonant with the mission and strategic objectives of the University, did not deem it necessary to include academic integrity ethos in their SGS Theses/Dissertation/Project Handbook: A Guide to the Preparation, Submission and Completion of Degree Requirement (2018). This omission implies that students may not have guidelines on ethical research practices in one document. While it is disappointing that this vital information is missing in the handbook, students are expected to familiarise themselves with ethical standards as part of their responsibilities as student researchers. However, the handbook provides detailed guidelines for proper referencing with examples of all the citation formats and styles.

In adherence to academic integrity standards, all postgraduate students are required to subject their theses to a rigorous plagiarism screening process using Turnitin text-matching software. This measure is not merely procedural but foundational to upholding the credibility and originality of scholarly work. As a mandatory component of the thesis submission protocol, a comprehensive Turnitin similarity report must accompany each final thesis. The institution has established a maximum acceptable similarity index of 25%; any thesis exceeding this threshold is deemed to contain an unacceptable level of textual overlap and is, therefore, classified as plagiarised. This policy underscores the university's commitment to fostering ethical research practices and ensuring that all scholarly contributions reflect genuine intellectual effort.

Interestingly, there are inherent challenges associated with this requirement. High levels of similarity in text do not always indicate plagiarism. Turnitin employs algorithms to compare submitted documents against extensive databases to identify similarities. When a submission matches the content in its database, Turnitin highlights these matches and provides a similarity score, which reflects the percentage of the document that overlaps with existing sources. The software also detects paraphrasing, improper citations, and other forms of academic misconduct. Therefore, faculty and students must thoroughly understand how the software works, how to address plagiarism issues, and how to ethically use generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools when writing their thesis.

As part of submission guidelines, graduate students are required to include a signed declaration page in their theses or dissertations before submitting them for final assessment. This declaration page should bear the endorsement of their supervisor(s), confirming their supervision of the research work and affirming that the preparation of their theses/dissertation/project was done in accordance with the guidelines laid down by the university. The template states;

**Student's Declaration**

> "I, …… *(Candidate's name)*, declare that this thesis, with the exception of quotations and references contained in published works, which have all been identified and duly acknowledged, is entirely my own original work, and it has not been submitted, either in part or whole, for another degree elsewhere.
> SIGNATURE: …….
> DATE: ……."

The words on the student's declaration page testify to the student's commitment to academic integrity and ethical scholarship. It also affirms the work's originality, authenticity, responsibility, and

[70] Miron et al., "Academic Integrity Policy Analysis of Publicly-Funded Universities in Ontario, Canada: A Focus on Contract Cheating."

ownership, dispelling any doubt of plagiarism, fraud, or contract cheating. It certifies the declarant (student) as the bona fide owner of the work. Therefore, it is essential to include a declaration page signed by the student and their supervisor(s) in their final thesis, dissertation, or project. Failure to do so would render the work incomplete and unacceptable for assessment and defence (viva voce). Additionally, some institutions may require students to sign a copyright agreement granting ownership of their work to the school. This demonstrates the value placed by the authorities on personal effort. The goal is to absolve the university from any potential legal actions and to give the university the authority to take any quasi-judicial action against the student should any academic misconduct be detected relative to the submitted thesis.

There appears to be a disconnect between policy and practice due to inconsistencies in faculty compliance and policy enforcement. Perhaps it is because thesis supervisors do not have direct access to the software to routinely check for plagiarism in their students' work during the thesis writing process and consultations. Even more concerning is the elusive nature of contract cheating in relation to technological detection tools (although there are emerging technological tools to detect it to some extent). In the existing circumstances, 'AI-giarism' and contract cheating have become 'an albatross' for tertiary education. In a recent study, Chan discussed 'Al-giarism' (a new morphology) as the new normal to contend with and strongly advocated for integrating generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) into tertiary education.[71] Against the backdrop of rapid changes in tertiary education post-COVID-19 pandemic and the ever-evolving generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) such as ChatGPT, 4.5 Claude 3.7 sonnet and their potential unethical use in cognitive-offloading of academic tasks, the university must, as a matter of policy, reconceptualise the traditional concept of academic cheating in general and contract cheating to reflect contemporary realities. Optimistically, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is the new frontier for knowledge acquisition and dissemination. A clear regulation on the ethical use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) will help students make informed decisions about using digital tools to create texts. It will also guide them on how to make the "development process transparent to assessors."

In this regard, universities are approaching the integration of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) into their policies with a range of strategies that reflect both optimism and caution. Recent empirical studies have shown that many institutions are moving beyond outright bans. For example, research examining ChatGPT policies among leading universities reveals significant variation: less than one-third have implemented explicit policies, and among these, a majority have adopted an inclusive stance by incorporating generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools into teaching and learning rather than imposing blanket prohibitions.[72] This suggests an emerging consensus that GenAI, when integrated responsibly, can serve as a valuable asset in the educational process. Sawahel reports that in 2024, the Mohammed VI Polytechnic University, Morocco (UM6P), became the first institution in Africa to incorporate ChatGPT into its educational programmes.[73] This pioneering initiative epitomises a forward-thinking approach to education in Africa. Such efforts are commendable and could serve as a model for the university under study.

Equally important is the establishment of comprehensive support mechanisms to cultivate knowledge and skills in academic integrity, an essential foundation for fostering an ethical academic culture. By offering targeted training and structured skill-building opportunities, academic community members will be better prepared to identify and avoid unethical practices. Consequently, it is recommended that integrity education be systematically embedded within the curriculum as an institutional policy.

The world is changing rapidly, with technology at the forefront of this transformation. It is driving progress in education and all areas of human development. Although it seems alarming, it offers enormous opportunities for growth and promotion; Ghanaian universities must not fall behind in this

[71] Cecilia Ka Yuk Chan, "Students' Perceptions of 'AI-Giarism': Investigating Changes in Understandings of Academic Misconduct," *Education and Information Technologies*, 2024, 1–22.

[72] Ping Xiao, Yuanyuan Chen, and Weining Bao, "Waiting, Banning, and Embracing: An Empirical Analysis of Adapting Policies for Generative AI in Higher Education" (May 24, 2023), available at http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4458269.

[73] Sawahel Wagdy, *"University Takes Lead in Africa as It Deploys New AI Tool." University World News. Africa Edition.* (UK, No.476: Higher Education Web Publishing Ltd, 2024).

revolutionary shift in tertiary education. They either embrace it or lose the edge. Therefore, postgraduate students should be equipped with the necessary knowledge, digital tools, and relevant competencies to navigate the evolving landscape of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR). To that end, institutional policies should align with the advancements in digital tools to future-proof postgraduate education. For the sanctity and credibility of postgraduate education, faculty must address these challenges through policy and educational approaches.

As the landscape of postgraduate studies continues to evolve, institutions must remain vigilant in their efforts to uphold academic integrity. This requires not only the development of robust policies but also a commitment to ongoing evaluation and adaptation. East explains that "effective academic integrity education enables learners to internalise the values of their university, to acquire their own conceptual understandings of academic authorship, and to take up opportunities to develop their capabilities."[74] Another important factor is adopting an inclusive approach to policy formulation and implementation, which creates a sense of ownership and collective responsibility to abide by its tenets.

Bretag et al. emphasised that fostering a robust academic integrity culture is essential for effective policy and practice integration.[75] East advocates the importance of consistency across policy development, educational initiatives, and actions to uphold integrity.[76] Above all, universities must transition beyond compliance-based models to cultivate environments where ethical conduct is internalised and celebrated. This cultural shift requires consistent messaging, role modelling by educators, and the alignment of institutional values with everyday practices.

The evolving nature of technology demands that academic integrity policies remain dynamic and responsive. Institutions must anticipate and address the implications of digital tools and platforms that facilitate academic dishonesty. This calls for continuous policy evaluation and the integration of technological literacy into academic integrity education.

## IMPLICATIONS

Within the Ghanaian context, the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) is mandated by the Education Regulatory Bodies Act, 2020 (Act 1023) Section 4(a) to "ensure that tertiary education institutions apply the highest quality standards and relevance of teaching, learning and research programmes and outcomes."[77] However, the study reveals gaps in institutional integrity policies that demand regulatory guidance. There is a pressing need for GTEC to incorporate academic integrity benchmarks into its quality assurance mechanisms, ensuring that institutions are held accountable for not upholding ethical standards. This resonates with Glendinning's contention that quality assurance and standards should be aligned with academic integrity.[78]

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This research underscores the critical need for harmonising academic integrity policies with institutional practices in postgraduate education. It offers actionable recommendations for institutions to strengthen their frameworks against contract cheating, thereby enhancing the overall integrity of academic programmes.

Bridging the gap between academic integrity policies and their execution in postgraduate education calls for a multi-pronged strategy. Universities should focus on developing cohesive, technology-aware policies that remain accessible to all parties. Through these efforts, institutions can inspire a genuine culture of integrity, securing the credibility of postgraduate education amid an increasingly complex academic world.

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[74] East, "Aligning Policy and Practice: An Approach to Integrating Academic Integrity."

[75] Tracey Bretag et al., "Academic Integrity Standards: A Preliminary Analysis of the Academic Integrity Policies at Australian Universities," *AuQF* 2011 (2011): 48–53.

[76] East, "Aligning Policy and Practice: An Approach to Integrating Academic Integrity."

[77] Ghana Tertiary Education Commission, https://gtec.edu.gh

[78] Irene Glendinning, "Aligning Academic Quality and Standards with Academic Integrity," in *Contract Cheating in Higher Education* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 199–218, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12680-2_14.

Certainly, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) will be shaping future knowledge acquisition and dissemination. A clear regulation on the ethical use of generative AI will help students make informed decisions about using digital tools to create texts. It will also guide them on how to make the "development process transparent to assessors."[79] Establishing a clear, single-concept title policy on academic integrity is vital. The policy should be written in straightforward, easy-to-understand language that everyone can read. Additionally, it should include a practical review cycle. The policy must be easily accessible and retrievable from the university's official website to reflect the institution's commitment to its importance.

Institutions should routinely evaluate their integrity policies' practicability and efficacy to ensure they achieve desired outcomes. Seeking feedback from students and faculty to identify areas for improvement makes them 'participants and not spectators.' Regular evaluations are essential for fostering an environment where ethical standards are not only upheld but continuously improved upon. Furthermore, collaboration with external organisations and stakeholders can provide valuable insights and resources to enhance the effectiveness of integrity initiatives. By addressing the complexities of contract cheating and prioritising academic integrity, institutions can safeguard the value of postgraduate qualifications and ensure that they continue to serve as a credible measure of student achievement and professional competence.

## CONCLUSION

The persistence of contract cheating significantly challenges the upholding of academic integrity in postgraduate studies. This calls for a thorough analysis to ensure policies properly align with real-world applications. Institutions strive to combat this form of misconduct by crafting detailed integrity policies. These aim to define unethical behaviour clearly, propose preventive measures, and promote ethical academic practices. Unfortunately, the actual effectiveness of these policies is often hindered by a disconnect in their implementation, indicating a discrepancy between their intended purpose and actual practice.

In the case of the university under study, the presence of formal ethical guidelines has not translated into effective practice, largely due to inconsistent terminology, limited accessibility, and the absence of targeted provisions addressing contemporary threats such as contract cheating and the misuse of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). The prevalence of vague language and overly complex legal jargon further alienates stakeholders, impeding their ability to engage meaningfully with integrity frameworks.

The findings suggest that inconsistencies between policy and implementation can undermine the credibility of academic programmes. Institutions must therefore undertake comprehensive policy reforms that reflect the realities of contemporary academic environments, particularly in light of emerging threats such as contract cheating. These include the integration of proactive measures to detect and deter misconduct, as well as the establishment of clear, enforceable guidelines that are consistently applied across departments and programmes.

The study also sheds light on the insufficient institutional mechanisms available to combat cheating effectively. To address this, academic institutions must revisit and modernise their integrity frameworks, ensuring they are comprehensive and flexible enough to address the rapidly changing educational landscape. This process requires inclusive efforts, engaging faculty members, students, and administrators in creating clear, accessible, and current guidelines that acknowledge emerging threats to academic integrity. Only through such collaborative and adaptive approaches can institutions build resilient academic cultures grounded in integrity, transparency, and shared responsibility.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

[79] East, "Aligning Policy and Practice: An Approach to Integrating Academic Integrity."

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