

Disciplinary Action as a Deterrence to Examination Malpractices in Tertiary Institutions in Ondo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the extent to which disciplinary actions deter examination malpractice in tertiary institutions in Ondo State, Nigeria. Disciplinary measures such as suspension, expulsion, and prosecution are widely adopted across institutions, including Adekunle Ajasin University (AAUA), Federal University of Technology Akure (FUTA), and Adeyemi Federal University of Education (AFUED). Using a descriptive analytical approach, the study evaluated institutional policies, enforcement practices, and students' perceptions of sanctions. Evidence was drawn from documented cases, existing literature, and institutional reports to assess the effectiveness of disciplinary mechanisms.

Findings revealed that while all institutions maintain formal zero-tolerance policies, the level of enforcement varies significantly. At AAUA, inconsistent application of sanctions and perceptions of influence and corruption weaken deterrence. FUTA demonstrates moderate effectiveness, with periodic enforcement actions temporarily reducing malpractice, although concerns about fairness and consistency persist. AFUED shows relatively stronger deterrence due to structured disciplinary processes and greater transparency, which enhance students' awareness of consequences. Overall, the study found that disciplinary actions are more effective when they are consistently applied, transparent, and perceived as fair and inevitable.

However, several challenges undermine their effectiveness, including inconsistent enforcement, corruption and collusion, delays in disciplinary processes, and the rise of technology-enabled malpractice. Additionally, negative student perceptions and socio-cultural pressures, particularly the emphasis on certificates over competence, further weaken the deterrent impact of sanctions.

The study concludes that disciplinary measures alone are insufficient to curb examination malpractice. Their effectiveness depends largely on credibility, consistency, and institutional integrity. It recommends strengthened enforcement, anti-corruption mechanisms, timely disciplinary procedures, and value reorientation to promote academic integrity.

Keywords: Examination malpractice, Disciplinary actions, Tertiary institutions, Deterrence theory, Academic integrity

INTRODUCTION

Examination malpractice continues to be one of the most persistent challenges facing Nigeria's educational system. Despite the introduction of various reforms and legal frameworks, such as the Examination Malpractices Act (1999), the problem remains widespread, particularly in tertiary institutions where the credibility of academic assessments is crucial (Onyibe, 2015). The persistence of this issue raises serious questions about the effectiveness of government policies and institutional interventions, suggesting that current measures may not be achieving their intended deterrent effect. Disciplinary measures, including suspension, expulsion, and prosecution, are formally intended to discourage malpractice (Ogbo, 2017; Adebayo, 2024). Yet, these sanctions are often applied inconsistently, creating a perception among students that punishments

can be avoided, negotiated, or reduced. Such inconsistencies weaken the deterrent power of disciplinary actions and undermine efforts to cultivate a culture of academic integrity (Joy, 2024).

While previous studies have extensively documented the prevalence, patterns, and psychosocial drivers of examination malpractice in Nigeria, relatively little attention has been given to evaluating the practical effectiveness of disciplinary actions, especially in local contexts such as Ondo State. Two key gaps emerge from the literature. First, much of the research has focused on the causes and prevalence of malpractice, with fewer studies examining how disciplinary measures actually work as deterrents. Second, empirical studies specifically addressing tertiary institutions in Ondo State are limited, despite increasing reports of malpractice in media and institutional records. Understanding these gaps is crucial for assessing how disciplinary actions can be improved to foster academic honesty.

This study, therefore, seeks to answer two main research questions: to what extent do disciplinary actions deter examination malpractice in tertiary institutions in Ondo State, and what challenges limit their effectiveness? The study has two objectives: first, to evaluate the deterrent effect of disciplinary measures in Ondo State tertiary institutions; and second, to identify and analyze the obstacles that hinder their effectiveness. The significance of this research lies in its potential contribution to scholarship on educational integrity. By examining disciplinary practices within the specific context of Ondo State tertiary institutions, the study provides insights that are both theoretically valuable and practically useful. Its findings can guide policymakers, institutional leaders, and educators in enhancing enforcement strategies and fostering a stronger culture of integrity, ultimately improving the credibility of academic assessments and reinforcing public confidence in Nigeria's higher education system.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Examination Malpractice

Examination malpractice is a complex phenomenon that has been defined in several ways by scholars. Olatunbosun (2009) describes it as any illegal act committed by a student or group of students, whether before, during, or after an examination, aimed at securing undeserved success. Adeyemi (2010) expands this definition to include any irregular behavior by candidates or those responsible for administering exams that compromises the integrity of the assessment process. Similarly, Anzene (2014) views examination malpractice as a range of unethical practices, including impersonation, leakage of questions, use of unauthorized materials, collusion, or bribing invigilators and examiners. These definitions highlight that examination malpractice is multi-dimensional; it is not limited to students but can involve teachers, parents, and other institutional actors. On a broad note, examination malpractice encompasses any action—intentional or negligent—that distorts the fair assessment of students' abilities. It is more than just cheating in the exam hall; it reflects systemic issues tied to institutional weaknesses, societal values, and governance challenges in education. In the context of this study, and particularly in tertiary institutions, examination malpractice can be understood as any deliberate or careless act by individuals or groups before, during, or after exams that undermines fairness, credibility, and reliability, giving unfair advantage to some learners. This definition underscores the pervasive nature of the problem and situates it as both an academic and societal concern, emphasizing the need for collective responsibility in promoting effective deterrence.

Disciplinary Action

Disciplinary action refers to formal measures adopted by institutions or governing bodies to correct misconduct, enforce standards, and prevent future violations. In the academic setting, these actions may include suspension, expulsion, rustication, withholding of results, or legal prosecution under frameworks like the Examination Malpractices Act (1999). Ogbo (2017) emphasizes that disciplinary actions are effective only when they are applied consistently and transparently. Afolabi (2022) adds that the deterrent power of penalties depends not just on their severity but on the certainty with which they are applied. According to Joy (2024), students are more likely to follow rules when they perceive sanctions as inevitable. In Nigerian tertiary institutions, disciplinary actions serve both punitive and corrective purposes, aiming to safeguard academic standards. However, their deterrent effect is often compromised by administrative delays, corruption, and

selective enforcement. For this study, disciplinary action is defined as all formal institutional and legal sanctions applied to students found guilty of examination malpractice, including suspension, expulsion, rustication, and prosecution, with particular attention to their ability to deter misconduct.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in deterrence theory, which posits that undesirable behavior can be prevented by instilling fear of consequences (Beccaria, as cited in Onyibe, 2018). The theory was developed by classical criminologists like Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham and is based on the idea that individuals are rational actors who weigh the benefits of deviant behavior against the likelihood and severity of punishment. In other words, people are less likely to engage in misconduct if they believe that consequences are certain, prompt, and significant. Deterrence theory is particularly relevant to examination malpractice because it frames disciplinary actions—such as suspension, expulsion, or prosecution—as preventive measures. The theory highlights three key principles that determine the effectiveness of sanctions: certainty, swiftness, and severity. Onyibe (2018) explains that for deterrence to work, students must believe that punishment is inevitable, quickly enforced, and sufficiently consequential to outweigh any potential gains from cheating. Research in Nigerian tertiary institutions supports this perspective. Ogbo (2017) stresses that the certainty of punishment is more influential than its severity; if students perceive that penalties can be avoided or delayed, the deterrent effect is weakened. Similarly, Adebayo (2024) notes that delayed or negotiable sanctions signal low institutional commitment, encouraging continued malpractice. In Ondo State, Olorunfemi and Abiola (2014) highlight that peer pressure and certificate-driven motivation often outweigh fear of punishment, further underscoring the importance of consistent enforcement. Equally, rare but highly visible sanctions demonstrate deterrence in action. For instance, the 2023 conviction of an Adekunle Ajasin University (AAUA) student for UTME impersonation (The Nation, 2024) illustrates that when disciplinary measures are enforced promptly and publicly, they can effectively discourage misconduct across campuses. Overall, deterrence theory provides a solid framework for understanding the role of disciplinary actions in preventing examination malpractice. It emphasizes that enforcement consistency, visibility, and perceived inevitability of punishment are central to deterring misconduct in tertiary institutions in Ondo State, Nigeria.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Examination malpractice has long been a concern in Nigeria, with far-reaching implications for education quality and national development. Scholars such as Onyibe (2015) trace the problem back to the 1970s and note that, despite the enactment of laws like the Examination Malpractices Act (1999), it remains widespread. Disciplinary measures, ranging from expulsion to prosecution exist but are often inconsistently applied, limiting their ability to prevent misconduct. Ogbo (2017) examined government interventions and found that sanctions are most effective when applied consistently. Yet, a culture of impunity, often fueled by collusion between staff and students, means that many penalties are negotiable or easily circumvented. Adeyemi (2010) highlights that even widely recognized sanctions such as suspension or expulsion do not always deter students, especially when enforcement is weak. Similarly, Olorunfemi and Abiola (2014) observed that peer influence and a strong focus on certificates often outweigh fear of punishment, suggesting that sanctions alone may not be enough to curb malpractice.

Recent studies in tertiary institutions further support these findings. Joy (2024) reports that while policies are in place, students perceive enforcement as inconsistent, undermining the intended deterrent effect. Adebayo (2024), studying Ekiti State, observes rising cases of impersonation and electronic cheating, challenging traditional disciplinary frameworks. Evidence from Kwara State College of Education (Afolabi, 2022) indicates strong support among students and staff for strict penalties like expulsion and prosecution, yet doubts about impartial enforcement persist. At the national level, IJRISS (2024) notes a continued rise in malpractice, linking it to weak enforcement, corruption, and inadequate monitoring. Local examples in Ondo State underscore these trends. The 2023 conviction of an AAUA undergraduate for UTME impersonation (The Nation, 2024) demonstrates that when sanctions are enforced publicly and promptly, they can serve as an effective deterrent. However, such prosecutions are rare, and most disciplinary measures fail to create a lasting preventive effect. It is glaring therefore that these studies show a clear gap: while much research documents the prevalence and causes of malpractice, few have examined how disciplinary actions function in practice,

especially in tertiary institutions in Ondo State. By focusing on the deterrent role of these sanctions, this study seeks to fill that gap and provide insights into how policies can be strengthened to uphold academic integrity.

Thematic Discussion

Extent to Which Disciplinary Actions Deter Examination Malpractices in Ondo State's Tertiary Institutions

Disciplinary actions such as suspension, expulsion, and prosecution are the main tools used by tertiary institutions to curb examination malpractice. However, their effectiveness varies greatly depending on enforcement, transparency, and how students perceive these measures. In Ondo State, institutions like Adekunle Ajasin University (AAUA), Federal University of Technology Akure (FUTA), and Adeyemi Federal University of Education (AFUED) have clear policies outlining sanctions for offenders. Despite this, enforcement is often inconsistent.

At AAUA, for example, the 2023 conviction of an undergraduate for UTME impersonation drew attention but did little to change students' perception that penalties can be circumvented through connections or financial inducement. At FUTA, expulsions of offenders in 2022 temporarily reduced malpractice, but students still questioned the fairness and consistency of enforcement. AFUED appears slightly stronger, with structured disciplinary committees and publicized sanctions, such as the 2023 expulsion of a student for falsely accusing a lecturer. Here, students are generally more aware of disciplinary procedures, leading to a moderate-to-strong deterrent effect.

Studies support these observations. Adeyemi (2010) found that students often regard sanctions as theoretical unless they see consistent enforcement. Olorunfemi and Abiola (2014) noted that peer influence and a strong emphasis on certificates often outweigh fear of punishment. National surveys also highlight this gap; IJRISS (2024) reported that 67% of students across Nigerian tertiary institutions believed that sanctions were inconsistently applied, undermining deterrence. Adebayo (2024) further notes that while 54% of students acknowledged that sanctions made them "think twice" before cheating, only 29% believed penalties were "always enforced."

This evidence suggests that disciplinary actions can deter malpractice when applied consistently and transparently, but sporadic enforcement and students' perceptions of negotiable penalties significantly weaken their overall impact. Policies alone are insufficient; the belief that punishment is inevitable and fair is what truly reinforces academic integrity.

Table 1: Extent of Disciplinary Actions and Deterrent Effect on Examination Malpractices in Ondo State Tertiary Institutions

Institution	Official Policy	Enforcement Consistency	Notable Enforcement Actions	Students' Perception	Deterrence Effect
AAUA	Zero-tolerance policy; sanctions include suspension, expulsion, and prosecution.	Inconsistent; sanctions applied sporadically.	Conviction of an undergraduate for UTME impersonation in 2023.	Often perceived as theoretical; some students believe penalties can be circumvented through influence or financial inducement.	Weak
FUTA	Strict academic integrity policies; sanctions include suspension, expulsion, and cancellation of results.	Moderately consistent; application of sanctions varies by case.	Temporary decline in malpractice observed after expulsion of offenders in 2022.	Acknowledged but questioned in terms of consistency and visibility.	Moderate

AFUED	Comprehensive disciplinary guidelines; sanctions include reprimand, suspension, or expulsion.	Structured enforcement via the Student Disciplinary Committee.	Student expelled for falsely incriminating a lecturer in 2023.	Students are aware of enforcement mechanisms, but perceptions of fairness and timeliness vary.	Moderate to Strong
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Sources: Generated from Joy, 2024. Adeyemi (2010), Olorunfemi & Abiola (2014), The Nation (2024), Joy (2024), Inside AFUED (2025), MySchool.ng (2024).

Table 1 shows how disciplinary actions have impacted examination malpractice in Ondo State tertiary institutions, revealing clear differences in their effectiveness. At AAUA, although there is a strict zero-tolerance policy with suspension, expulsion, and prosecution, enforcement is irregular. For instance, the 2023 UTME impersonation conviction drew attention, but many students still view penalties as avoidable through influence or bribery, making the deterrent effect weak. At FUTA, enforcement is somewhat more consistent, and actions like the 2022 expulsion of offenders temporarily reduced malpractice. Students still question whether sanctions are applied fairly and consistently, resulting in a moderate deterrent effect. AFUED stands out with more structured enforcement through its Student Disciplinary Committee, including the 2023 expulsion of a student for falsely incriminating a lecturer. Here, students are generally aware of the disciplinary mechanisms, and while some concerns about fairness and timeliness remain, the deterrent effect is moderate to strong. Overall, the table highlights that policies alone are not enough—consistent enforcement, transparency, and the belief among students that penalties are real and fair are what truly make disciplinary actions effective.

Challenges that Undermine the Effectiveness of Disciplinary Actions as Deterrence Mechanisms to Examination Malpractice in Ondo State, Nigeria

Despite the existence of policies prescribing suspension, expulsion, and even prosecution for offenders, several challenges continue to undermine the effectiveness of disciplinary actions as deterrence mechanisms in Ondo State tertiary institutions.

1. Inconsistent Enforcement of Disciplinary Measures: In Ondo State tertiary institutions, the enforcement of disciplinary measures against examination malpractice often lacks consistency. While policies such as suspension, expulsion, and prosecution are codified in institutional regulations, their application frequently depends on administrative discretion or political considerations. This inconsistency undermines the deterrent effect of these measures, as students may perceive that penalties are negotiable based on their status or connections. According to Adebayo (2024) such discretionary enforcement can lead to perceptions of injustice and inequity among students, thereby eroding trust in the system. Also, Adeyemi (2010) highlighted that inconsistent application of sanctions contributes to a culture of impunity, where students feel emboldened to engage in malpractice without fear of consequences.

2. Corruption and Collusion: Corruption and collusion between students and staff in Ondo State weaken the deterrent power of disciplinary actions. Instances of students bribing lecturers or invigilators to escape punishment, as well as staff actively colluding with students to facilitate malpractice, have been reported (Olorunfemi & Abiola, 2014; Adebayo, 2024). These unethical practices normalize the idea that penalties can be avoided through influence or financial means, thereby eroding the credibility of enforcement mechanisms and reinforcing a culture of impunity in Ondo State Tertiary Institutions. Such corruption not only compromises the integrity of the examination process but also demoralizes honest students and staff, perpetuating a cycle of misconduct.

3. Technology-Enabled Malpractice: The rise of technology-enabled malpractice presents a significant challenge to traditional surveillance methods. With the advent of smartphones, micro earpieces, and online leakages of examination questions, many conventional monitoring techniques have become inadequate. As Adebayo (2024) wrote that the advancement in technology has outpaced the development of corresponding monitoring systems, rendering existing measures ineffective against modern cheating techniques. These

technologies make it difficult for invigilators in Ondo State Tertiary Institutions to detect and prevent malpractice, thereby reducing the deterrent effect of disciplinary actions.

4. Delays in Disciplinary Processes: The delays in resolving examination malpractice cases diminish the immediacy and impact of sanctions. Onyibe et al. (2015) unfolded that in many Ondo State institutions, disciplinary panels take months or even years to conclude cases. By the time a verdict is reached, students may have graduated or forgotten about the incident, weakening the psychological impact of sanctions. This delay reduces the deterrent effect of disciplinary actions in universities, polytechnics and colleges of education in Ondo State, as students perceive the consequences as distant and uncertain.

5. Negative Student Perceptions Regarding Sanctions: It can be explained that negative perceptions regarding the certainty of penalties encourage continued malpractice. Afolabi (2022) showed that nearly half of surveyed students doubted whether expulsions or suspensions would ever be enforced. This disbelief diminishes the psychological weight of penalties, emboldening students to engage in malpractice despite existing regulations. In this way, Ruwah (2025) wrote students' perceptions of the ineffectiveness of sanctions contribute to a culture of nonchalance towards examination misconduct in high institutions of learning in Ondo State, Nigeria.

6. Socio-Cultural Pressures and Certificate Orientation: Beyond institutional dynamics, societal and cultural pressures significantly influence student behavior. Adeyemi (2010) unveiled how the emphasis on certificates over skills drives students to prioritize passing exams at any cost. While Adekalu (2025) argued that the desire for certificates often outweighs the importance of acquiring knowledge, leading students to engage in malpractice to meet societal expectations. This "certificate syndrome" has shaped academic culture in Ondo State, Nigeria, encouraging short-term success over long-term integrity.

CONCLUSION

Examination malpractice remains a persistent challenge in Nigeria's tertiary institutions, and Ondo State is no exception. This study shows that while disciplinary actions—such as suspension, expulsion, and prosecution—have the potential to deter misconduct, their effectiveness is often undermined by inconsistent enforcement, delays in disciplinary processes, corruption, and students' perceptions that sanctions can be negotiated or avoided. Furthermore, socio-cultural pressures, including the strong emphasis on certificates over skills, continue to drive students toward unethical behaviors despite existing policies. The evidence suggests that disciplinary measures alone cannot fully eliminate malpractice; their impact depends heavily on consistency, transparency, and the visible application of sanctions. When students believe that penalties are fair, certain, and timely, these measures can indeed shape behavior and promote academic integrity. Ultimately, enhancing the deterrent effect of disciplinary actions requires a combination of rigorous enforcement, cultural change within institutions, and broader societal support for honest scholarship. Strengthening these mechanisms will not only safeguard the credibility of academic assessments but also foster a culture of integrity that benefits both students and the educational system as a whole.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is obvious from the thematic discussion that examination malpractice continues to challenge the integrity of tertiary education in Ondo State, Nigeria, despite the presence of formal/legal sanctions. Therefore, the following actionable strategies are suggested for implementation.

i. Ensure consistent enforcement of disciplinary measures: Disciplinary actions such as suspension, expulsion, and prosecution often lose their deterrent effect when applied inconsistently. To address this, tertiary institutions should adopt standardized disciplinary guidelines approved by governing councils to guarantee uniform application across all cases. Implementation should involve systematically documenting proceedings, publicizing outcomes to demonstrate fairness, and monitoring adherence to ensure transparency. University management, in collaboration with the Ondo State Ministry of Education and the National Universities Commission (NUC), should take responsibility for enforcing these measures consistently.

ii. **Establish robust anti-corruption and anti-collusion mechanisms will help:** Corruption and collusion between students and staff significantly undermine the effectiveness of disciplinary actions. Institutions should form independent oversight committees, including student representatives, alumni, and civil society members, to monitor disciplinary processes and report irregularities. The establishment of anonymous whistleblowing platforms is also crucial, allowing students and staff to report malpractice without fear of reprisal. Governing councils, supported by agencies such as the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), should lead these initiatives to ensure integrity in enforcement.

iii. **Upgrade monitoring systems to address technology-enabled malpractice:** The increasing use of smartphones, micro earpieces, and online exam leaks has outpaced traditional surveillance methods. To counteract this, institutions must invest in electronic monitoring technologies, train invigilators to identify and prevent technology-driven cheating, and implement digital honor codes signed by students before exams to reinforce accountability. University ICT departments and institutional management, with support from the Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy, should oversee these upgrades.

iv. **Expedite disciplinary processes to enhance deterrence:** Delays in resolving examination malpractice cases reduce the immediacy and impact of sanctions. Institutions should set maximum timelines for disciplinary panel conclusions, implement digital case-tracking systems, and fast-track straightforward cases such as impersonation or unauthorized material use. Tertiary institution senates, disciplinary committees, and regulatory bodies such as NUC and NBTE must supervise these processes to ensure timely adjudication and strengthen deterrence.

v. **There is the need to strengthen student awareness and perception of sanctions:** Negative perceptions regarding the certainty of penalties encourage continued malpractice. Tertiary institutions should organize pre-examination workshops where past offenders share experiences, publish annual reports detailing cases and sanctions, and integrate ethics and integrity modules into general studies curricula. Student Affairs divisions, university senates, and the National Orientation Agency (NOA) should lead these awareness and sensitization programs to cultivate a culture of accountability among students.

vi. **Reorient students and society towards valuing competence over certificates:** Socio-cultural pressures emphasizing certificates over skills drive students to prioritize passing exams at all costs. To address this, institutions should introduce career and skill-development programs emphasizing employability, partner with industries to showcase graduates who succeed through competence, and conduct community outreach to educate parents and guardians on the dangers of pressuring students to achieve results unethically. The Ondo State Ministry of Education, tertiary institutions, professional associations, and community leaders should collaborate to implement these programs effectively.

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