

Admission Standards as Pathways to Examination Malpractice: A Critical Analysis of Irregular Admissions and Academic Dishonesty in Higher Education

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Abstract: The purpose of the study was to explore how university entrance requirements relate to test fraud. Research has thoroughly studied test fraud, its reasons, and the implications. However, there has been relatively little research into how admission irregularities affect later dishonest behaviour in the form of test fraud. Utilising an analysis of 96 studies of test fraud in sub-Saharan Africa, combined with data collected from other universities worldwide, we developed a conceptual model illustrating the ways that admission irregularities can cause dishonesty to occur at examinations. The conceptual model includes four mediating variables: (a) academic underpreparedness (i.e., when students enter college using fake or inflated credentials, they do not have the needed knowledge to pass courses; therefore, they feel pressure to commit test fraud); (b) moral disengagement (i.e., once students commit fraudulent acts to gain college admission, they will likely rationalize committing future fraudulent acts as acceptable); (c) institutional capture (i.e., if colleges profit financially from fraudulent admissions, then institutional interests become aligned against upholding academic integrity); (d) social norms or peer expectancy effects (i.e., the existence of peers who entered college via fraudulent means creates an environment where it becomes socially acceptable to engage in similar behaviour). The authors synthesised evidence regarding admission irregularities in several different countries (Nigeria, India, Ghana, Kenya, and the UK) and analysed the processes that lead to environments in which students experience high levels of support for their dishonest behaviour at examinations. The results indicated that the integrity of the admission process determines whether students will be honest during exams. Therefore, the authors concluded with suggestions for developing procedures to verify applicant information for admission purposes, developing strategies to assist academically under-prepared students, and revising disciplinary policies to prevent both the admission- malpractice connection and other forms of dishonesty.

Keywords: Examination malpractice, admission standards, academic integrity, irregular admissions, higher education, Sub-Saharan Africa, academic dishonesty.

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Introduction

Examination malpractice has become an endemic issue for higher education systems throughout the world. From "miracle examination centres" in Nigeria to the fabrication of entry qualifications at Indian universities, to the systematic collusion between invigilators and candidates in Ghana, to contract cheating networks operating across international borders, academic dishonesty has taken forms and scales that threaten the credibility of educational credentials. According to the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), during the period of 2021 – 2023, the number of candidates involved in examination malpractice in Ghana increased from over 10,000 to 44,586. This led WAEC to warn of malpractice threatening the integrity of education in Ghana (Ansa-Asare, 2025). A systematic review of 96 examination malpractice studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa from 2012 to 2023 identified societal pressure and obsession for academic certificates as the most frequently cited causes of examination malpractice and the erosion of educational quality and devaluation

of certificates as the major effects (Mireku, Bervell & Dzamesi, 2024). Although there is a wealth of documentation concerning the causes and consequences of examination malpractice, one critical dimension of the problem has received remarkably limited empirical attention: the relationship between admission standards used to admit students into higher education and their subsequent propensity to engage in honest examination behaviour. Universities routinely expel students who have secured admission with fake results. For example, Bayero University, Kano, expelled 171 students who had secured admission with forged O-Level results and diploma certificates (Premium Times, 2026). The Kogi Polytechnic is investigating a syndicate of nine suspects for alleged certificate racketeering and document falsification, including some students, non-students and a few disreputable staff members accused of manipulating academic records in clear disregard of due process (The Herald Newspaper, 2025). In India, Somaiya Group colleges cancelled admissions of fifty students who were admitted with fake documents from schools affiliated with other boards

(Times of India, 2024). However, in virtually all documented cases, institutional and policy responses to irregular admission have been punitive expulsion of the affected student(s); arrest of perpetrator(s); public statement of zero tolerance without systematic analysis of why admission irregularities and examination malpractice are so frequently correlated or how the former may license, exacerbate or institutionalise the latter.

This paper addresses this gap by asking a fundamental but neglected question: do admission standards influence examination malpractice, and if so, through what pathways does irregular admission translate into dishonest examination behaviour?

This paper argues that the relationship between admission irregularities and examination malpractice is not merely coincidental but rather causal and mediational. Students admitted through irregular means are systematically underprepared for the academic demands of university-level study, creating intense pressure to cheat (the academic underpreparedness pathway). Students who have already engaged in dishonesty to gain admission experience moral disengagement and rationalise subsequent cheating as no worse than the original transgression (the moral disengagement pathway). Institutions which tolerate or profit from irregular admissions lose organisational capacity and will to enforce academic integrity standards consistently (the institutional capture pathway). And the presence of irregularly admitted students in classrooms normalises dishonest behaviour, creating peer expectancy effects that reduce the social costs of cheating for all students (the peer expectancy pathway).

This paper proceeds as follows. Section two reviews theoretical literature on examination malpractice and academic integrity, drawing upon established frameworks such as the Fraud Triangle theory of planned behaviour and the conceptualisation of moral disengagement. Section three synthesises evidence on the prevalence and forms of admission irregularities throughout higher education systems with particular emphasis on sub-Saharan Africa. Section four analyses the pathways through which irregular admission translates into examination malpractice using existing empirical literature and illustrative case studies. Section five examines institutional and systemic factors which mediate/moderate the admission-malpractice relationship, including academic probation reforms, verification systems, and corruption. Section six discusses practical/policy implications. Section seven concludes with recommendations for future research.

To address the question of whether there is a link between the two types of fraud -- admission and examination malpractices this chapter focuses on how a single model of fraud, the Fraud Triangle, can be used to examine both types of fraud, while using another theoretical model of fraud, the Theory of Planned Behaviour, to provide additional insight into the nature of the problem.

Donald Cressey's Fraud Triangle Model explains why individuals commit occupational fraud. Three elements must exist before someone commits fraud: perceived pressure (incentive) to do the dishonest act, perceived opportunity to engage in the dishonest act, and rationalisation (the ability to convince oneself that the act is justifiable).

In terms of perceived pressure, numerous studies have shown that pressure to meet family expectations/guardians (Gunu & Amua Sekyi, 2016), parental pressure to obtain high grades (Anagbogu & Bichene, 2024), the drive to receive high grades due to an overly heavy course-load, and the risks and penalties of

unemployment due to limited job openings (Mireku et al., 2024) serve as strong motivators. When students enter college via fraudulent means -- either through forged documentation or inflated qualifications the pressure to achieve is intensified. Furthermore, since families and/or guardians who assisted or were complicit in the illegal admission are now pressuring the student to achieve academically well enough to prevent exposure of their own fraudulence, there exists additional external pressure on the student to cheat. The college environment in which these conditions exist is: less than stringent testing policies/test administration and/or supervision; less-than-severe disciplinary actions taken when students violate rules against cheating; social pressures/social norms that condone dishonesty as an acceptable standard of conduct among peers; and less-than-adequate disciplinary action for those who cheat (Mireku et al., 2024). Importantly, the admissions process itself may also establish or indicate potential for dishonesty. By gaining admission through fake documentation, students are aware that their institution lacks adequate verification mechanisms, that dishonesty during the application process succeeded, and that detection of dishonesty during the exam period would likely result in little to no consequence. Clearly, this is evidence of dishonesty succeeding in terms of being admitted into the institution. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that dishonesty on exams will similarly succeed and will likely be met with little or no punishment. Rationalisation allows people to justify their dishonest actions by convincing themselves that what they are doing is ethically acceptable. While this is perhaps one of the most insidious and misunderstood aspects of the relationship between admission irregularity and examination malpractice, there is some empirical support for this. Researchers surveyed Ghanaian undergraduate students regarding whether they considered cheating on an exam seriously offensive, yet not when their peers allowed them to copy off of them. The researchers concluded that a large number of the participants felt comfortable cheating because they rationalised that they did not commit a wrongdoing as long as all parties agreed to participate in the cheating (Gunu & Amua Sekyi, 2016). Students who previously cheated on their entrance exams may find this form of rationalisation especially relevant. Since students have already compromised their integrity by engaging in cheating during the admissions process, they may rationalise that continuing to cheat during exams is not significantly different from admitting they initially cheated. Furthermore, students may believe that if they cheated to get into school, then they need to continue to cheat to maintain their fraudulent status as a legitimate student.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour

Ajzen (1991) created a theoretical framework called the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). The TPB is designed to describe why people intend to behave in certain ways. The TPB describes how people decide on purposeful behaviours, like whether or not to cheat on exams. The TPB states that behavioural intentions are based upon three variables: attitude towards behaving in a particular way (whether positive or negative feelings about behaving in a particular way), subjective norms (social pressures to behave in a certain way), and perceived behavioural control (how easy or difficult it is to behave in a specific manner). Examining exam malpractice through the lens of the TPB suggests that a student's intent to cheat on an exam will increase as follows: 1) the student develops positive attitudes toward cheating; 2) the student observes other important social figures (friends/family) approving of cheating; 3) the student feels confident that they can complete an assignment without detection.

Admission irregularities play a significant role in each variable above. A student who has been able to successfully enter an educational program through dishonest methods has established a favourable attitude toward dishonest behaviour. Admission fraud creates a situation in which a student's experience leads them to develop a positive attitude toward dishonest behaviour as an effective method to attain goals. Students who have been admitted through irregular means typically associate with classmates who have also been admitted through irregular means, especially in instances where admission irregularities occur frequently. As a result, within these groups, subjective norms favouring dishonest behaviour prevail and reinforce perceptions that cheating is not only permissible but anticipated. Attitudes toward cheating represent the first component of the TPB. If a student has been able to deceive faculty members into accepting his/her false credentials, he/she is more likely to view cheating as an acceptable behaviour. When a student observes that someone else cheats during a written exam and they do not receive any form of disciplinary action, they then see that important others approve of cheating, and therefore that approval becomes stronger. Secondly, the process of admitting students teaches those students about how well the institutions' controls work – or don't work. If a student's fraudulent documents were admitted into the university without proper verification being done, they know that the institution's monitoring and enforcement systems do not function properly. This knowledge directly influences the perceived behavioural control, that cheating on examinations will not be detected or punished either.

Moral Disengagement

Bandura (1999) defined moral disengagement as the cognitive processes through which individuals can choose to disconnect their moral self-sanctions from inhumane actions so that they can perform behaviour that goes against what is morally acceptable and feel no remorse for doing so. There are eight mechanisms of moral disengagement:

- i. Moral Justification: reframing a harmful action as having a higher purpose,
- ii. Euphemistic Labelling: using sanitised terms to describe harmful behaviours,
- iii. Advantageous Comparison: comparing your own harmful behaviours to greater evils to make yours seem less severe,
- iv. Displacement of Responsibility: placing responsibility with authorities,
- v. Diffusion of Responsibility: spreading responsibility among a group,
- vi. Disregard or Distortion of Consequences: minimising the damage you cause,
- vii. Dehumanisation: denying the characteristics of humanity to the victim(s),
- viii. Attribution of Blame: attributing fault to the victim for causing themselves harm.

Once a student has received admission via fraudulent methods, the student may have already undergone moral disengagement before the admission process. To obtain fraudulent admission, both the student and their families would need to have rationalised the act in a manner that negated their moral self-sanction. As soon as a student uses one of these types of

rationalisations for one type of dishonest behaviour (admission fraud), they establish a cognitive mechanism that can generalise to additional areas of dishonest behaviour (exam cheating).

A student who employed euphemisms to justify admission fraud will use the same euphemistic labelling to justify exam cheating. A student who displaced responsibility for admission fraud to the parents and/or agents will likewise displace responsibility for exam cheating. Additionally, if a university expels students for admission fraud (as occurred with Bayero University, Kano) but does so inequitably, the expelled students may rationalise their expulsion as unjust, thus blaming the University for its Supposed Selective Application of discipline rather than acknowledging their prior dishonesty. This form of externalizing blame may continue this cycle of dishonesty, especially if the expelled student transfers to another institution. Additionally, when universities fail to detect admission fraud, students' moral disengagement mechanisms are implied and reinforced.

Admission Irregularities: Types, Prevalence and Responses from Universities

Before investigating the links between irregular admission and examination malpractices, we need to present an organised summary of the types of admission irregularities found in the literature, their prevalence, and how universities respond to them.

Forms of Admission Irregularity

Admissions irregularities represent a wide variety of dishonest actions taken at the time of entry to higher education. Examples of such actions include:

1. Falsification of Entry Credentials: Falsification of Entry Credentials includes the provision of forged or manipulated entry credentials, which include secondary school graduation certificates, diploma results, and standardised test scores. Bayero University, Kano, had removed from its student body 71 students for making fraudulent statements about their qualifications because they used fake O-Level results and diplomas to be admitted into Bayero University, Kano. The decision to remove these students was made after the Senate Committee investigated allegations of irregular admissions at Bayero University, Kano.
2. Entrance Exams Impersonation: Entrance Examination Impersonation involves another individual sitting for an entrance examination in place of the individual who originally registered to sit for that examination. Since impersonating another individual in entrance examinations is usually associated with high-stakes national examinations for entry into medicine and engineering programs (among other highly sought-after professional programs), this behaviour is most commonly seen in high-stakes national examinations. There is a relationship between "non-attending schools" and proxy testing or impersonation; non-attending schools are those which admit students who did not attend school. In addition, Coaching Centres are being paid large sums of money to help prepare students to pass entrance examinations given by the National Testing Agency for Engineering/Medical School programs.

3. **Manipulation of Admission Documents** Manipulation of Admission documents includes unauthorised changes to an institution's admission documents. Examples of this include changing grades, substituting one document for another document, and admitting unqualified individuals to an institution with the aid of its staff members. A study conducted at Kogi Polytechnic found that multiple dishonest administrative workers and dishonest students/non-students had conspired together to manipulate the academic record of students in complete disregard for all due process and institutional integrity. Corruption and bribery of Admission officials is when students pay bribes to be admitted, change grades or overlook missing qualifications or inadequate qualifications. Many systems are auctioning Admission to competitive programmes through "back door" channels with proceeds shared among corrupt officials, faculty members and political patrons. False information about eligibility criteria involves providing false information on age, residency status, prior disciplinary history, etc., in relation to other requirements for eligibility.

Prevalence and evidence

Estimating the true extent of Admission irregularities is, by nature, difficult as they are concealed, and therefore detection rates are low. However, available evidence suggests that Admission fraud is not an uncommon phenomenon.

The Bayero University case illustrates this point. In one investigation at Bayero University, 171 students were expelled for Admission fraud. This indicates that one institution has taken action against one group of students. Furthermore, it suggests that the actual number of students who have been admitted without documentation beyond those already detected may well be substantially higher. Similarly, the Kogi Polytechnic case, where nine suspects (including students, non-students, and staff) were under investigation for certificate racketeering and document falsification, also shows how commonly syndicates of persons are involved in the process of Admission fraud, which is commonly characterised as an individual act.

In India, the Admission racket at Somaiya Group colleges led to the cancellation of admissions for 50 students after it was discovered that many students admitted with fake documents from schools affiliated with other boards were actually students from the state board (Times of India, 2024). This pattern suggests a systematic use of inter-jurisdictional verification gaps by students.

News media and investigative reporting provide additional evidence. The "miracle examination centres", special secondary schools encouraging cheating in school certificate exams in Nigeria, have been identified as feeders into higher education Admission fraud (SOAS anticorruption evidence, 2022). Students obtaining fraudulent pass marks at the secondary level through these centres will then be admitted to universities based on those fraudulent qualifications, entering higher education without any legitimate academic foundations.

Institutional responses

Institutional responses to detected Admission irregularities can generally be classified into three types: punitive, preventive and restitutory.

Punitive responses include the expulsion of affected students, referral for criminal prosecution and public name and shame. The Bayero University mass expulsion was framed as "a necessary step to sanitise the institution's academic records and maintain the value of its degrees" (Premium Times, 2026). As the University reinforced its commitment to maintain the highest possible level of ethical conduct, as violations of University policies will be met with severe penalties, the University also announced that "BUK has a 'zero-tolerance' stance towards both academic dishonesty and disorderly behaviour." (Premium Times, 2026). Preventative responses comprehend enhanced verification procedures for Admission documents, including digital credential verification platforms, post-admission audits and authentication stamps or codes from issuing authorities. Following intelligence reports and routine verification exercises performed by the Admission, ICT & security units at Kogi Polytechnic, the fraud was uncovered (The Herald Newspaper, 2025), thus suggesting that systematic verification procedures can detect irregularities.

Restorative responses, though less common than other forms of responses, include providing academically under-prepared students access to bridge programmes, academic support services or alternative pathways to Admission rather than outright expulsion. The restitutory approach recognises that most irregularly admitted students are themselves victims of fraudulent agents or pressure from parents, and that removing such students from an institution does nothing to address either the student's academic deficiencies or the structural conditions which created them. Determining whether these types of responses effectively deter future incidences of adult learner irregularities and block the transition from irregular Admission to malpractice in examinations lacks further research. While the removal of the offending student from the institution removes them from the context of malpractice, thereby reducing the chances of their cheating in examinations. They do not deal with the academic deficiencies that the student would have experienced if they had remained. Moreover, students removed from one institution can apply to other institutions, thereby continuing the cycle of Admission fraud. Some UK and US universities issue notations on students' academic records of academic misconduct, which must be declared upon application to other institutions, but such mechanisms are rare in sub-Saharan Africa.

Pathways from irregular Admission to examination malpractice

Pathway One: Irregular admission creates an opportunity for academic underpreparedness to foster examination malpractice. Irregular admissions create an opportunity for academic underpreparedness to foster examination malpractice. Students with false or inflated qualification credentials will generally not have the prior knowledge, skills, and academic competencies needed to complete university coursework. When faced with an assessment that assumes a base level of knowledge that does not exist, students may choose one of three options:

- Option 1- to admit that they lack the necessary skills and competence needed to succeed in their coursework; seek remedial support (in which case they risk revealing their fraudulent qualification credentials); fail their courses; or be placed on academic probation.
- Option 2- cheat on examinations; pass their courses without possessing the required knowledge.

- Option 3- attempt to master the course material, but face possible failure in their courses.

Both options 1 and 2 create an unavoidable pressure on irregularly admitted students to cheat on their examinations. Both options represent a systemic, not individual, response to academic underpreparedness.

Having secured entry through fraudulent means, no student wants to signal their fraud by failing any courses. Furthermore, families who invested resources into securing the irregular admission expect academic success as a return on investment for those resources. Additionally, for students who are themselves victims of fraudulent agents (they paid for legitimate admission services only to discover later that the admission was fraudulent), there is a compounded desire to continue down the fraudulent trajectory due to a desperate determination to get something out of the financial investment. The academic underpreparedness pathway is particularly acute in professional programs in medicine, nursing, engineering, and law, where the consequence of academic inadequacy extends beyond academic failure to potential harm to patients, clients, or the public. A research investigation into examination misconduct among student nurses in Ghana determined that inadequate preparation by the students was a major reason for misconduct during examinations, along with a failure to provide adequate supervision, support/guidance/counselling. (Adjei, 2024) A research investigation conducted into parental influence and test anxiety as predictive indicators of an intent to engage in examination misconduct among Nigerian university undergraduates established that each variable was a significant predictor of examination misconduct intentions. (Anagbogu & Bichene, 2024) Therefore, it is those students who are subject to parental expectations to perform academically while experiencing low self-confidence regarding their academic abilities who are at the greatest risk of cheating. Additionally, the educational underpreparedness pathway presents a sequential process over time. Those students who cheat on initial exams due to a lack of prior knowledge will be less prepared with the necessary prerequisites for subsequent coursework, resulting in an increasing cumulative deficiency, which adds additional stress to cheat later. The initial act of examination cheating undertaken to mask admission fraud makes further cheating increasingly necessary as the knowledge gap widens.

Pathway Two: moral disengagement

The second pathway includes moral disengagement, which describes the cognitive process whereby students who have already committed admission fraud rationalise subsequent cheating on exams as morally permissible.

Moral disengagement mechanisms operate at the admission stage and generalise readily to examination cheating. Euphemistic labelling transforms “cheating” into “working the system,” “survival.” An advantageous comparison makes examination cheating seem less serious than the initial admission fraud, framing it as “just keeping up” rather than starting fresh with dishonesty. Displacement of responsibility attributes the cheating to institutional failures rather than personal moral choice. Research on Ghanaian undergraduates provides insightful data regarding the rationalisation structures that enable moral disengagement. Research conducted among Ghanaian undergraduates found that respondents believed copying colleagues’ work without permission was a serious offence, while doing so with permission was not; therefore, the sampled students “consented to cheating—they

believed that they committed no misconduct once the parties involved had agreed upon the act” (Gunu & Amua Sekyi, 2016). This finding is profoundly important for understanding the moral disengagement pathway from irregular admission to examination malpractice. Students who have participated in a fraudulent admission process, often including family members, agents, and possibly institutional staff, have normalised the concept of consensual dishonesty. Since admission fraud has been presented as a transaction between willing parties (student and agent/family member/corrupt official), the stages have been set for examination cheating to similarly be framed as a consensual transaction between the student and the source of illicit answers.

Awareness does not necessarily equate to an adequate understanding of what constitutes academic misconduct. In fact, while nearly 92% of participants in the Gunu & Amua Sekyi (2016) study claimed to be familiar with the academic dishonesty policies at their respective institutions, only about 31% of them felt confident in their comprehension of those policies. This disparity in familiarity versus knowledge represents a potentially fertile area for rationalisation. Specifically, a student could assert he/she “did not know” a certain behaviour was considered academically dishonest, despite being cognizant that academic dishonesty is generally unacceptable. Additionally, prospective moral disengagement can be applied to admission irregularities. Students contemplating the use of fraud in order to secure admission may construct a moral justification for the act of fraud. For example, they may view fraud as a required element of competing in a corrupt system; fraud as a victimless offence because another candidate would have secured admission otherwise; or fraud as justifiable as a means of protecting family honour. By applying prospective moral disengagement prior to engaging in examination cheating, the individual can justify examination cheating using the same reasoning without requiring further cognitive processing.

Pathway Three: Institutional Capture

The third pathway from irregular admission to examination malpractice exists at an organisational level as opposed to an individual level. Institutional capture arises when the economic incentives to generate revenue at an institution, or other forms of incentive such as reputation or political power, cause an organisation to tolerate irregular admissions. As this type of institutionalised tolerance develops, so too does the organisation’s tolerance for academic misconduct. For example, if a private university generates most of its operating income from tuition payments received from students, the institution faces substantial incentives to accept students who do not meet established qualification criteria for admission. Similarly, when an institution regularly accepts students who provide false information regarding their qualifications, the institution loses credibility and the capacity to respond decisively if the same students are caught cheating on examinations. Indeed, the institutional decision-making processes that led to the acceptance of the student with false qualifications will similarly lead to the acceptance of the student cheating on examinations. The loss of a cheating student is costly to the institution, regardless of whether the motivation for the loss is rooted in maintaining academic integrity standards or in generating cash flow. Similarly, institutional capture may exist when faculty or staff are directly involved in facilitating admission irregularities. For example, at Kogi Polytechnic, “a handful of dishonest employees who had falsified academic records as part of the admissions fraud, violated fair procedures and institutional values” (The Herald Newspaper, 2025). Employees who engage in

supporting fraudulent activities during the admission process will be unable to support the integrity of examinations. For example, a staff member who has been bribed to modify admission documents cannot be relied upon to report a student for cheating on an examination. The corrupt incentives that supported the original admission irregularity will similarly support any subsequent examination irregularity. The Reports by The Ghana Report (2025), which describe how GES officials, supervisors, head teachers and invigilators transformed a national assessment process into an organised crime syndicate with the intention of exchanging educational honesty for money, provide examples of the extent of possible institutional capture.

When examiners themselves are corrupt, the security of all aspects of the assessment process is severely undermined. More importantly, many of the individuals responsible for conducting examinations are also responsible for admitting students based on examination scores. Therefore, when the examination process itself is compromised, so too is the legitimacy of decisions made concerning admission based on those results. As institutional capture develops within one institution, it spreads throughout an entire industry or sector. Thus, when audits were conducted of private universities in Ghana and it was discovered that 20 percent of students admitted by selected private university colleges did not have verifiable documentation indicating they wrote the West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), and that there were instances where candidates were admitted with failing grades (E8 and even F9) (Yankah, 2018); likewise, audits identified widespread and systematic problems related to admission irregularities and examination malpractices. Consequently, as an entire industry begins to normalise irregular admission practices and thus collapse distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate admissions, similarly, distinctions between legitimate assessments and examination malpractices begin to collapse.

Pathway Four: Peer Expectancy Effects

Peer expectancy effects represent the last pathway through which irregular admissions translate into examination malpractices. Peer expectancy refers to influences exerted by irregularly admitted students on their peers' behaviours and beliefs. Students who witness many classmates commit acts of dishonesty on exams without punishment will be influenced in their own behaviours. Studies conducted among Ghanaian undergraduate students found that almost 40 per cent of the respondents indicated they had witnessed their classmates committing acts of academic dishonesty before; however, less than six per cent of those witnesses indicated they ever reported such incidents (Gunu & Amua Sekyi, 2016). The failure of students to report incidents of observed academic dishonesty represents a peer expectancy effect. When students see others cheating go both unnoticed and unpunished, they will assume that cheating is the norm rather than the exception. Peer expectancy effects are especially powerful regarding Admission irregularities because irregularly admitted students frequently develop coherent social networks based upon their shared knowledge of their fraudulent entry. These networks develop their own norms, languages and mutual support systems that normalise and protect dishonest behaviour. A student who was admitted through means of fraud may share with peers specific details about how they were able to enter school illegally, e.g., the name of an agent used to facilitate Admission; the method(s) of document forgery used to gain Admission. These actions create a community of practice in academic dishonesty. As documented within the

Ghanaian study, the phenomenon of consensual cheating, whereby a student believes that copying with permission is not misconduct (Gunu & Amua Sekyi, 2016), occurs within peer networks. When one student asks another for permission to copy material from them, the granting of that permission creates a reciprocal obligation between the two parties that binds them together in mutually protecting each other from being detected. Both parties now have a legitimate interest in preventing the cheating from being discovered.

This dynamic is further amplified when the cheating takes place within a network of irregularly admitted students who are already invested in supporting each other's fraudulent statuses. Furthermore, peer expectation effects can influence students who have been lawfully admitted to college. Since regularly admitted students see that illegally admitted students are cheating and achieving success while being punished for this behaviour, they will be inclined to reduce their expectations and cheat as well. All students perceive that "all students cheat," so there is less perceived social cost of cheating from all students. For example, a student who previously was unwilling to cheat on tests because he/she had strong moral convictions about doing so, might now believe that cheating is required in order for him/her to compete effectively within his/her peers' grade environments since grades no longer represent students' actual abilities or knowledge.

Institutional and Systemic Factors Influencing the Relationship Between Admission Irregularities and Examination Malpractice

Institutional and systemic variables affect how strongly the connections linking admission irregularities to subsequent examination malpractices exist. Thus, these factors can either strengthen or weaken the causal linkages between Admission fraud and post-Admission examination malpractice.

Verification procedures and detection probability

The efficacy of institutionally conducted verification procedures for documents submitted during the Admission process is a key moderator variable. When universities conduct thorough verification of Admission documents, including direct authentication with issuing authorities, biometric verification of identity and random sampling audits of student files after Admission, the probability that fraud will be identified at the Admission stage increases. Increased detection probability at the Admission stage functions as a deterrent to would-be fraudsters and decreases the number of irregularly admitted students who enter the university.

Significantly, verification procedures communicate institutional commitment to academic integrity. When students believe their university places serious importance on detecting and addressing Admission fraud, those same students are more likely to believe that the university seriously addresses examination malpractice. The Kogi Polytechnic case demonstrated that routine verification processes can and do identify irregularities (The Herald Newspaper, 2025).

Socio-economic Context & Corruption

Both the occurrence of admission irregularity and pathways to examination malpractice are influenced by a wide range of socio-economic contexts. For example, when there are high levels of unemployment among young people, universities are highly competitive because they offer limited numbers of places, and there is a strong cultural belief that the possession of an academic

qualification determines social mobility. Therefore, the pressure to achieve admission to university by whatever means possible is very great. The review of examination malpractice in Sub-Saharan Africa found that "the societal pressure and obsession with acquiring academic certificates" were the two most commonly reported reasons why students engaged in malpractices. Furthermore, "the socio-economic pressures arising from the high stakes attached to achieving academic success and the limited employment opportunities" encourage students to engage in malpractices. (Mireku et al. 2024).

A corrupt system provides the enabling environment for admission irregularities and examination malpractices. If parents can bribe officials to assist them in securing admission, then officials who work in examinations can sell questions so that they may make money; therefore, the line between legitimate and illegitimate ways of attaining educational qualifications is blurred. The "Miracle Examination Centres" of Nigeria provide evidence of how systemic corruption in the education system could develop into a system that favors credentialism instead of education. (SOAS Anti-Corruption Evidence, 2022).

Disciplinary Frameworks & Enforcement Consistency

Disciplinary sanctions for both fraudulent admission and cheating during exams influence the strength of the connection between admission fraud and exam malpractices. Where both types of sanctions are severe, consistently enforced (irrespective of whether or not the student is connected or made a financial contribution), and publicly announced, then deterrence occurs.

Many institutions do not have robust disciplinary frameworks based on inconsistent application of rules, light punishments for first-time cheating offenders, and poor transparency in the process of deciding penalties. Absence of serious consequences and weak disciplinary measures were found to contribute to the prevalence of examination malpractices in Sub-Saharan African Higher Education. (Mireku et al. 2024). If students believe that it is unlikely that they will be caught engaging in fraudulent activities, and/or that even if they are caught, no action will follow, then deterrence does not occur.

In addition, what matters for the relationship between admission fraud and exam malpractices is the perceived probability of detection and penalty at the time of admission. A student who engages in fraudulent activity during the admission phase, without being detected or penalized, learns about the weaknesses of the institution's ability to provide effective deterrents. This knowledge generalizes to other areas of behaviour: a student who gets away with fraudulent activity during the admission phase rationally believes he/she/they will be able to cheat on exams too.

Summary of major findings

There is a correlation between admission standards and exam malpractices, which exists due to four mediating paths. Admitted students who present falsely exaggerated qualifications enter university unprepared academically and face extreme pressure to cheat on exams to hide their deficiencies in knowledge (academic under-preparedness path). Students who commit fraudulent admissions experience moral disengagement and justify subsequent exam cheating as acceptable via mechanisms such as euphemistic labelling, displacement of responsibility and comparative advantage (moral disengagement path). Institutions that accept or benefit from irregular admissions suffer organisational loss of ability to enforce academic integrity consistently since staff complicity and financial rewards undermine

enforcement (pathway of institutional capture). Additionally, students who are irregularly admitted into university establish a model of peer expectation behaviours within their student community that legitimise dishonest behaviours regardless of whether or not these students themselves were honestly admitted (pathway of peer expectations).

These pathways are moderated by institutional or systemic factors, such as the intensity of verification systems, availability of academic probation/remediation assistance, broader socio-economic context/corruption environment, and consistency/severity of disciplinary enforcement. In systems with rigorous verification, ready access to remedial services, minimal/minimalised levels of corruption as well as frequent and penalising enforcement for cheating on exams, the paths from fraudulent admissions to universities to subsequent student engagement in academic dishonesty/exam malpractice will be severely diminished. Conversely, pathways between fraudulent admissions to university and subsequent exam malpractices are strengthened in environments where verification is lax, remediation assistance is non-existent, corruption is endemic/enforced, and enforcement against cheating is inconsistent/punitive.

Practical Implications

The study's findings suggest the following four priorities for actions by university administrators.

First, enhance the systems for verifying admissions. Investing in documentation verification, biometric checks, and post-admission auditing of applicants' credentials can decrease the number of students admitted irregularly and thus reduce all four pathways to cheating at the point of entry. Second, develop probationary programmes that include remedial support rather than merely warning students about their academic performance. Underprepared students, regardless of whether the preparation deficits are due to prior schooling issues or irregular admission, benefit from programmes that offer tutoring, academic advising, foundation courses, etc., that enable them to succeed. Universities that fail to provide such support risk creating a situation where cheating is more likely among underprepared students. Thirdly, reform your school's disciplinary process for fairly addressing fraudulent admittance cases as well as students who are found guilty of cheating on exams; by reporting any disciplinary action taken in a manner that preserves student privacy, you can show other students at the college your commitment to maintaining academic integrity. Gradations of punishment should be assigned so that each time an offence is committed, it increases the penalty. Fourth, invest in developing a "culture of integrity". Integrity-related orientations, honour codes, faculty models of ethical conduct and/or student-led initiatives related to promoting academic integrity can influence social norms about what is acceptable academic behaviour by changing expectations of peers regarding what constitutes honest academic work. The report of Mireku et al. (2024) that the best ways to prevent exam cheating are through establishing strong educational values and examining ethics further suggests that changes to the campus culture related to supporting academic integrity are equally as important as changes to administrative structures.

Policy Implications

National higher education regulatory bodies require policies that link and coordinate admission standards and exam integrity issues as mutually dependent issues rather than as independent issues. The GTEC's requirement that private

universities verify WASSCE scores with WAEC represents one example of a policy approach that links these issues together. While this policy requires only that students with verified qualifications be admitted, thereby limiting the number of students admitted irregularly (and addressing the first pathway), it also ensures that only students with valid qualifications take exams, thereby increasing the validity of WASSCE certificates (and addressing the erosion of certificate value caused by cheating). Government ministries responsible for education are advised to integrate policies aimed at preventing cheating on exams with policies aimed at preventing admission fraud since the two types of misconduct are empirically and theoretically connected. Policies focused solely on preventing cheating on exams while ignoring admission irregularities will fail to effectively eliminate cheating as long as the large number of irregularly admitted students continue to cheat to make up for their lack of preparedness. Professional organisations responsible for licensing medical doctors, nurses, engineers and lawyers should be especially concerned about the implications of this research. If cheating occurs during both the admissions process and throughout the entire period of enrollment, then many professionals who enter these professions will do so unqualified. These organisations should consider requiring institutions to provide certification to licensed professions, so that only individuals meeting the established criteria for admission are admitted to the profession, and they should also randomly select samples of applicants seeking licenses and verify their original documents.

Limitations and Future Research

There are some limitations to this research. The pathways described above are based upon a conceptual framework developed using empirical studies already conducted. However, few studies have examined the causal impact of admission fraud on cheating on exams using empirical data collection. Thus, future studies utilising quantitative methodology (i.e., cohort designs that follow students from the time of admission until completion of the degree) could test the causal impact of admission fraud on cheating on exams. Additionally, the current focus of this paper is on admission fraud as the main type of irregular admission. Other types (e.g., affirmative action policies that lower admission standards for designated populations without fraud) could result in similar pressures on students to cheat if they feel they cannot compete fairly, given their level of preparation. The pathways analysed would need to be expanded to identify between fraudulent irregularities (which are illegitimate) and policy-sanctioned flexibilities (which are legitimate). As noted earlier, the implications for cheating may vary depending upon the legitimacy/legitimacy status of the pathways taken. Fourth, the institutional capture pathway is also in need of more extensive empirical study. Although the paper asserts that institutions that allow "irregular" admissions lose the organisational capacity and will to enforce examination integrity, there is relatively little empirical evidence available regarding how financial incentives erode institutions' ability to enforce their own rules. Case studies of institutions where the level of corruption in admission and/or examination practices has either increased or decreased over time may help to clarify the causal processes underlying institutional capture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper above examines an unaddressed area in the literature on examination malpractices in Higher Education namely the relationship between admission standards

and examination malpractices. Through synthesizing theories from the Fraud Triangle, Theory of Planned Behaviour, and Moral Disengagement, along with evidence from previous studies on examination malpractices from various countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and globally, the paper identifies four pathways through which irregular admissions result in subsequent examination dishonesty: academic underpreparedness, moral disengagement, institutional capture, and peer expectancy effects. The paper shows that ensuring admission integrity is important to the pursuit of academic integrity in higher education. In addition to providing fair access to higher education, it is a significant predictor of future academic integrity. As a result of being academically underprepared due to having been admitted without sufficient preparation, students experience extreme pressure to engage in examination dishonesty to hide their deficiencies. Those who committed fraudulent acts at the point of entry into higher education are morally disengaged and believe that engaging in such behaviour after entering higher education is acceptable. Institutions that accept irregularly admitted students are less capable of enforcing regulations related to examination integrity and have less desire to do so. Finally, the existence of students who were irregularly admitted serves as a model for all students, regardless of how they entered higher education because it creates expectations among students about how they should behave during examinations. Therefore, as a result of the interconnectivity of admission and examination integrity, universities must develop strategies that work toward strengthening admission verification procedures, developing probation systems that provide additional academic support to students, revising disciplinary codes so that they contain consistent sanctions for violations, and fostering an environment where integrity is valued.

Additionally, if universities fail to strengthen their admission verification procedures while simultaneously attempting to improve examination integrity through the development of stronger sanction systems, then they will likely see minimal success. All three parties involved that is the university administrators, national regulatory agencies and professional associations have a responsibility to take action to break the linkages between the two.

Authors Contribution

J.M.O: Contributed to conceptualisation, investigation, data collection and analysis, reviewing and editing of the manuscript

N.A.O.O: Contributed to the writing of the original draft, editing and reviewing processes

A. N K. O. M: Conceptualisation and methodology formulation

M.E.O: Contributed to proofreading

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