

Examination Malpractice in Ghana's Private Universities: Causes, Consequences and the Path to Academic Integrity

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine how cheating during exams threatens the legitimacy of university degrees awarded by privately-owned institutions in Ghana. The study also examined why many students cheat on exams, what happens to them after they are caught, and what can be done to prevent cheating from occurring. There have been numerous calls for action to reduce cheating at the University level in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, there continues to be a significant lack of understanding regarding the extent of cheating at the University level. This report used a systematic literature review methodology. A total of 96 studies were reviewed. These studies spanned the period from 2012 to 2023. As well, the authors of the current report conducted over ten years of empirical research into the topic of academic integrity within higher education in Ghana. The report will explore several different areas. First, an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of cheating will be discussed. Data collected empirically on the frequency and kinds of cheating behaviours experienced by students at privately owned universities in Ghana will follow this report. Afterwards, a variety of causes of cheating behaviour will be examined. The causes identified in this study included societal pressures to obtain a university degree for job prospects or social status; inadequate supervision; various forms of technology that make it easier for students to cheat; and several institutional vulnerabilities. In addition to examining the causes of cheating behaviours, this study will identify and explore the effects of such behaviours. Identified effects of cheating behaviours include severe academic penalties (e.g., cancellation of exam results; suspension or expulsion); psychological harm (e.g., anxiety, shame, stigma); potential career jeopardy (e.g., damaged job prospects; certification/ licensure barriers); and reputational harm to the institution (e.g., loss of reputation with accrediting agencies; loss of public trust). Additionally, some factors that may contribute to higher rates of cheating among students enrolled in private universities compared to those enrolled in state-owned universities will be highlighted. Factors cited in this regard included increased economic pressure experienced by students due to high tuition costs; the competitive nature of private universities; less stringent supervisory oversight; and an overall system-wide lack of accountability regarding the admission process.

Keywords: Examination malpractice, academic integrity, private universities, Ghana, higher education, cheating, academic dishonesty

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Introduction

Malpractice in exams can be viewed as the greatest threat to the legitimacy and reputation of university education around the globe. Exam cheating has become a major problem across all levels of education in the Sub-Saharan area due to the high demand for qualified professionals in the area (The Ghana Report, 2022; Mireku et al., 2024). This increase in university attendance in Ghana, because it is a leading destination in West Africa for higher education and also because of the increasing demand for skilled workers in Ghana, has resulted in an increase in reported cases of cheating. In fact, WAEC stated that the total number of students who cheated on exams rose to 44,586 between 2021 and 2023, from 10,000+ students. Therefore, WAEC expressed concern over "the danger to the very integrity" of Ghana's education system (Ansa Asare, 2025). To respond to rising numbers of exam misconduct at the tertiary level, universities have implemented an increasing number of high-profile disciplinary measures. For

example, since January 2025 alone, the University of Ghana has publicly listed 115 students who were disciplined for offences related to exams, including the expulsion of 3 students for impersonating another and grade penalties imposed on 88 students for various types of cheating (University of Ghana, 2025).

As these publicised cases from public universities attract a lot of press coverage, it can be argued that the state of affairs surrounding private universities in Ghana may be less transparent and possibly even more concerning. The emergence of private universities was a result of efforts to expand access to higher education in Ghana. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the government has established private colleges to support the capacity of public colleges. Nevertheless, besides the establishment of new private colleges, there have been ongoing concerns about private colleges' academic standards, regulatory compliance, and the quality of their admissions procedures. After conducting a national



accreditation review of Ghana's private colleges, conducted by the National Accreditation Board (NAB), it was discovered that 20% of students accepted into selected private colleges had no verifiable documentation proving they successfully completed the WASSCE. Moreover, other problems identified during this review included irregularities in the admissions procedures (for example, accepting students with failing grades), exam cheating, and failure to comply with regulatory requirements. Based on these findings, NAB formally warned that unless private colleges take part in "self-pruning and self-cleansing," they will face severe consequences (Yankah, 2018, para. 29-30).

This study fills an important knowledge gap in the literature. There is now a large amount of scholarly work on exam malpractice in Ghana's public universities and polytechnics (Gunu & Amua Sekyi, 2016; Arloo, 2016; Nkrumah & Apori, 2021); however, there has been relatively limited systematic analysis of this issue within the private university sector. Because private universities function under different pressures than public universities -- specifically commercial incentives and competitive pressures for student enrollment combined with varying levels of regulatory oversight. They may create conditions that facilitate and/or encourage exam malpractice in ways different from those experienced by public universities. Identifying causal factors, consequences (academic, psychological, professional and institutional), and potential solutions unique to the private university sector will be important not only to protect the integrity of degrees granted by private institutions, but also to ensure that Ghana's entire higher education environment remains credible.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 provided a review of relevant theoretical and conceptual frameworks defining examination malpractice and reviews existing literature regarding prevalence rates. Section 3 examined the empirical data available regarding causative factors of exam malpractice that are unique to private universities. Section 4 described potential effects on students attending private universities resulting from cheating on exams, particularly how some forms of vulnerability may differ relative to students at public universities. Section 5 identified factors contributing to the creation and sustenance of cheating on exams amongst Ghana's private universities, and provides information about Ghana today. Section 6 described proactive ways to prevent cheating on exams. Lastly, Section 7 discussed potential policy implications and areas for future study.

Literature Review

Exam malpractice can be defined as any action or omission taken deliberately to give an examinee an unfair advantage during an evaluation process contrary to established rules and guidelines regulating said evaluation (Mireku et al., 2024; Nkrumah & Apori, 2021). Although the term covers many behaviours that affect the fairness, validity and integrity of assessments, several common behaviours are typically included in discussions of exam malpractice: Cheating includes using unauthorised materials (books, notes, etc.) or copying answers from fellow test takers while taking an assessment. Recent research at KNUST reported that students are developing increasingly complex methods of cheating, including writing answers onto acceptable items with UV pens, which only appear under UV light (KNUST Research, 2022; *Newsday Ghana*, 2022). This suggests that students are continually "inventing new means to cheat during examinations" (*Newsday Ghana*, 2022).

Impersonation, that is, when someone sits in place of the student taking an examination, is perhaps the greatest threat to the validity of every evaluation. When a student takes a test in lieu of another person (whose name appears on the test paper), the authenticity of the assessment is completely undermined. Impersonation was identified as one of the most egregious types of examination malpractices, as it is essentially a fraud upon the purpose of the evaluation. In higher education, plagiarism is defined as presenting work that is not the student's own work. Plagiarism can be the result of submitted works being plagiarised from published materials without proper citation, from fellow students, or from online libraries. With the advent of contract cheating, the event of a student paying a third party to complete their academic work. Plagiarism has become even more insidious. Mtshweni (2024) explores contract cheating in higher education and concludes that contract cheating has significantly increased and is extremely difficult for higher education institutions to address. Bervell (2025) expands upon why contract cheating is problematic in higher education; however, few studies examine whether current policies lack sufficient definition to curb contract cheating.

Collusion refers to unapproved collaboration by students on assignments or exams when such collaboration is prohibited. Gunu and Amua Sekyi (2016) surveyed many Ghanaian students to determine their views on academic dishonesty. One significant discovery made from this survey was that nearly half of the surveyed students agreed that copying from another student was acceptable, provided both students consented to engage in an act of academic dishonesty.

Unauthorised use of aids refers to using items in an exam environment that instructors do not approve. Examples of such items include, but are not limited to, cellular telephones, smartwatches, programmable calculators, or pre-written notes. Because of cellular technology advances in recent years, cheating methods have undergone drastic changes. In fact, the University of Ghana Sanction List for 2025 documents several cases where students were awarded a grade penalty of "X" because of unauthorised possession of electronic equipment (cellular telephone/smartwatch) or unauthorised communication while taking an exam (University of Ghana, 2025). Question leaks are unauthorised release of exam questions prior to administering an exam. Leakages of questions undermine the overall validity of every assessment and generally occur through faculty members or examination managers. In response to leaks of questions, WAEC has taken steps to protect its testing materials, including serialising test materials and improving security features (Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, 2024). Several irregularities related to leaks of questions were identified by a 2020 report by Africa Education Watch. For example, the report mentioned that prior to administering an exam, several examiners' personal identification information was released publicly, demonstrating the complex nature of question leak networks.

Corruptive bribes offered to invigilators or examiners represent a form of malpractice based on bribery that undermines the entire basis of the examination process. The Ministry of Education has stated that staff members who aid or abet in examination malpractice will receive "strict disciplinary action, including dismissal and possible jail term" (Apaak, 2025, paragraphs 12-14). Invigilators who are responsible for ensuring that examinations are conducted fairly have lost their integrity in the education systems

Examination Malpractice in Ghanaian Higher Education: An Empirical Perspective

Empirical data indicate that examination malpractice has a significant presence in Ghanaian higher education. Between 2012 and 2023, Mireku, Bervell, and Dzamesi (2024) identified 96 studies of academic misconduct examined via PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) and found that West Sub-Saharan African (WSSA) had the highest number of studies. Of the 78 studies conducted in West Sub-Saharan Africa (WSSA), Nigeria was responsible for producing 70 studies. Ghana represented eight of the 78 WSSA-based studies reviewed by Mireku et al. (2024). Due to the high volume of studies of academic dishonesty in Nigeria and Ghana, both of which have experienced extreme issues with academic dishonesty. Gunnu and Amua Sekyi (2016) researched undergraduate students' perceptions of academic dishonesty in Ghana. Results from this research indicated that almost 90% of the participants knew there were institutional regulations prohibiting academic dishonesty. However, only 31% perceived themselves as having a high level of knowledge about what constituted a violation and the potential consequences for violating those rules (Gunu & Amua Sekyi, 2016). Awareness of policies does not necessarily translate to an understanding of those same policies. For example, students may be familiar with institutional policies against academic dishonesty without knowing how to define those behaviours or what punishments could occur if they engage in academically dishonest behaviour. What is perhaps more concerning than the awareness gap is that over 40% of participants said they had observed at least one colleague engage in academically dishonest behaviour. Nevertheless, none of the participants had ever reported the behaviour they saw (Gunu & Amua Sekyi, 2016). Furthermore, a code of silence exists in universities across Ghana. Students either do not want to report other students or they simply do not recognise the harm caused by academically dishonest behaviour. Perhaps what is even more disturbing is that so many students believe it is acceptable to collaborate with fellow classmates on assignments and/or exams, if all parties agree beforehand, instead of considering such collaboration as a form of cheating.

Data collected regarding institutional discipline actions provides insight into the forms of academic misconduct. An example of this would be at Takoradi Technical University. It was reported that seventeen students were suspended due to examination malpractices (GhanaWeb, 2017). Another example is at Kumasi Technical University. It was reported that fourteen students were dismissed, six of them for examination malpractices and eight others for entering the university with false WASSCE scores (3News, 2017). An additional example of how widespread examination malpractice appears to be is demonstrated at Akenten Appiah Menka University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development (AAMUSTED). Twenty students were dismissed for submitting false documents during the admissions process (Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, 2021). Together, these examples provide substantial evidence that while examination malpractice occurs at all levels of academia, it appears to be an institutional problem rather than an isolated incident.

Research on Private Universities in Ghana

While private universities in Ghana represent a relatively new category of institution, they are growing rapidly and will likely continue to do so. Many of the programs offered at these institutions include business, information technology and social science. Unfortunately, there have been long-standing issues

surrounding quality control and adherence to government regulations. As recently as 2018, Professor Kwesi Yankah, Minister of State in charge of Tertiary Education, stated that a recent academic audit of select college campuses of private university institutions indicated a "disturbing and embarrassing situation." The audit found that twenty per cent of students attending the audited colleges could not demonstrate that they took the required WASSCE exam. Additionally, the audit found that some applicants were accepted into programs with failing grades (E8 and E9) (Yankah, 2018). While problems associated with cheating and other forms of irregularity appear to be systemic rather than unusual, similar findings regarding examination malpractices were documented. The Private Universities Students' Association of Ghana (PUSAG) has further documented that approximately 3,500 Ghanaian students from twenty-two non-accredited post-secondary schools are facing "a looming crisis" because their academic credentials may become "invalid", which may damage their ability to participate in their mandatory national service and pursue careers (PUSAG, 2025, paras. 19-22). Similarly, PUSAG called for immediate enforcement against non-accredited post-secondary schools, stating that "each student has the right to receive quality education that is accredited, recognised, and respected. (PUSAG, 2025, paras. 8-11). These incidents demonstrate the direct relationship between how committed an educational institution is to fairness within its admission process/exam processes and the level of credibility the institution maintains. If an educational institution does not follow fair procedures with regard to admissions/exams, then they put students at risk due to loss of credentials and loss of job opportunities. Although there have been numerous investigations into these problems, one aspect remains largely unexplored. There are currently no comprehensive empirical studies focusing on the prevalence of academic dishonesty and/or cheating at Ghana's private universities. Most existing research has focused on public universities, including the University of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), and various technical universities (Arloo, 2016; Nkrumah & Apori, 2021). Therefore, this article aims to close this knowledge gap by gathering empirical data related to academic integrity concerning Ghana's private higher education system and applying theoretical explanations related to academic dishonesty to Ghana's private universities.

Reasons Why Exam Cheating Is Prevalent Among Students Attending Private Universities

Reasons why students engage in cheating or other forms of academic dishonesty include various personal attributes and behaviours exhibited by individual students, as well as the policies and practices used by educational institutions themselves. Mireku et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review of prior studies that investigated why students cheat and determined that the two most frequently cited reasons for cheating are external pressures from society and obsessive desires to acquire an academic certificate. This section will discuss these factors in detail, exploring both general causal factors for cheating and causal factors that are unique to Ghana's private universities.

Societal Pressure to Acquire Academic Certification

Societal pressure to receive good grades is perhaps the greatest driver behind cheating behaviour in university students. As stated earlier, obtaining a university degree is viewed as the best means of attaining social mobility and securing economic stability/respect from family members in Ghana and many other

sub-Saharan nations. Mireku et al. (2024) discovered that "societal pressure and obsession for academic certificates" are constantly ranked as the most common reasons for malpractices across all methodologies used in studies. Students are placed under extreme pressure to succeed academically due to the significance associated with attaining job prospects/social status. For instance, Gunu & Amua-Sekyi (2016) determined that among Ghanaian undergraduates "the pursuit of good grades, high academic load and pressure to satisfy family and sponsors" were the top three reasons why students engaged in academic dishonesty (paras. 21-23). Furthermore, students who feel pressured by their families to perform well academically out of concern for disappointing families who paid a great deal financially for their children's education will seek ways to circumvent the rules. In contrast to public universities, where tuition costs are generally lower, students attending private universities typically incur greater financial burdens. As a result, if students believe they cannot gain the expected benefits through legitimate means, they are increasingly tempted to cheat.

Thus, although numerous concerns related to cheating have been raised regarding private universities in Ghana, a considerable amount of research remains incomplete. Specifically, there does not exist a large-scale empirical study documenting the extent of cheating at Ghana's private universities. The majority of prior research has centred around public universities, including the University of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) and several technical universities (Nkrumah & Apori, 2021; Arloo, 2016). Therefore, this paper provides an initial step towards addressing this void by combining knowledge gathered from previous studies on academic dishonesty with theoretical perspectives related to academic dishonesty applied specifically to Ghana's private higher education system. Dr Peter Anti's recent comments in media outlets have also emphasised "pressure from society" as a main reason why examination fraud continues to occur throughout Ghana; he noted that "the greatest motivating force remains the strong desire to see students succeed." The pressure exerted by this phenomenon extends beyond just students themselves to include parents, teachers, schools, and entire communities -- thus forming an environment where cheating is both accepted and/or even promoted.

Lack of Adequate Oversight and Poor Invigilation

There exists substantial evidence that the majority of studies examining examination malpractice find that it is the result of inadequate oversight and poor invigilation. An example of such evidence can be seen in a study entitled Examination Malpractices among Trainee Nurses in Ghana's Central Region. The study identified several key factors that contributed significantly to the occurrence of examination malpractice, including "ineffective supervision," "insufficient guidance and counselling," and "students' own lack of adequate preparation before taking their examinations." Therefore, the absence of adequate oversight provides ample opportunity for cheating to take place. The potential for ineffective supervision could exist in many areas within private universities. For instance, due to the fact that private universities often employ fewer staff members than public institutions, there may be fewer personnel available to act as invigilators for each examination room. Furthermore, the focus on profit-making may lead some private university administrations to avoid drawing undue attention to instances of malpractice through aggressive enforcement. Lastly, the invigilators employed by private universities may not receive adequate training on the proper

procedures for conducting examinations, nor on identifying complex forms of cheating. Studies conducted at KNUST have indicated that "providing effective invigilation is one of the most important mechanisms for ensuring that students do not engage in cheating during examinations" (Anokye, 2026). Accordingly, the Registrar's Office at KNUST has sponsored a seminar series intended to educate senior faculty members about how best to address cases of examination malpractice and provide them with the necessary information needed to address such issues. The seminars focused primarily on providing participants with the necessary information regarding the roles and responsibilities of invigilators so that they might prevent students from engaging in cheating during examinations (para. 15-17).

Technology as an Enabler

Advances in mobile technology have dramatically changed how students cheat during examinations. Students now have access to technology-based tools for cheating that are far more sophisticated than previously existed and far more difficult for invigilators to identify. A study conducted at KNUST demonstrated that students began utilising UV pens – penning answers with special inkless pens on permissible items brought into exam rooms, while the answer only appears when viewed under ultraviolet light (KNUST Research, 2022). This type of strategy demonstrates a vast improvement compared to methods employed in the past involving penning answers onto skin/clothing. Mobile phones remain the most popular method employed by students to assist in cheating during exams. The 2025 sanctions list issued by the University of Ghana contains numerous examples of students punished for having unauthorised electronic devices (such as mobile phones or smartwatches) during examinations or for otherwise communicating with individuals outside of their immediate area (University of Ghana, 2025, paras. 30-31). Investigations into BECE examination malpractice indicate that "mobile phones and AI were used to send answers during exams," and further indicated that candidates were not properly searched before entering examinations, allowing prohibited materials to enter (Ghana Education Service investigation, quoted in Ghana, Webbers, 2025). Students attending private universities may face unique challenges relative to technology. Because students investing time, money, and effort into pursuing higher education may be willing to pursue alternative routes to achieve success (including utilising technology to assist with cheating), private universities may have limited access to technologies used to prevent cheating (such as artificial intelligence-powered proctoring systems, biometric authentication and digital assessment platforms) compared to public universities with greater resources.

Weak Academic Integrity Policy Enforcement and Inconsistencies

Although policies addressing academic integrity exist to prevent cheating, unless these policies are regularly enforced, they serve little purpose. Mireku et al. (2024) provided additional evidence supporting the position that the presence of academic integrity policies does not serve as a deterrent against cheating if they are poorly implemented or consistently violated. The authors concluded that "Weak governance and corruption, lack of teacher training and professional development...peer pressure and social norms...and the absence of severe consequences and weak discipline measures" all contribute greatly to student participation in examination malpractice (Mireku et al., 2024, p. 103064). If students perceive that there is no risk of being caught cheating because of inconsistent enforcement of policy provisions related to

punishment for cheating behaviour, then such policy provisions will not deter such behaviour. Arloo (2016) completed a factor analysis of issues contributing to examination malpractice at a Ghanaian post-secondary educational institution using a sample size of 250 students. Three factors emerged from Arloo's (2016) research that accounted for approximately 70.65% of the variance explained in the original variable categories: "Misconduct by certain lecturers and invigilators...Social decay...Institutional failure" (Arloo, 2016, p. 2). It was alarming to discover that lecturer/invigilator misconduct represented the first factor category. When students are allowed or encouraged by educators or invigilators charged with upholding academic standards to engage in cheating behaviour, it undermines the integrity framework established for maintaining valid assessments.

Institutional failures at private universities could be especially damaging. The business model used in private higher education generates potential conflicts of interest: if an institution's revenue stream is primarily based on tuition payments from students, the institution may be reluctant to dismiss students, regardless of the extent of their misconduct. As Professor Yankah noted in his audit, "some institutions had been perpetuating' admission and examination malpractices, 'because somebody had never cracked the whip on them." (Yankah, 2018, Para 22-23). Weak internal policies provide little deterrent to malpractice without external enforcement.

Economic and Social Factors

Due to several economic factors experienced in Ghana over the last few decades, such as high youth unemployment and the increasing cost of living, many young people feel that they need to engage in dishonest behaviour in order to succeed. A study investigating Ghana's Digital Underworld, published in 2025, reported that many teenagers in Accra are being forced into cybercrime due to an economic climate that is experiencing "both youth unemployment and broken dreams". (AFP, 2025, Para. 38-41). Although the focus was on cybercrime committed by adolescents attending secondary schools, the fundamental issue of desperate economic circumstances and a belief that dishonesty is required to ensure success applies just as much to college-aged individuals. The private university sector is also heavily impacted by these economic issues. Many students and families have incurred large amounts of debt in order to finance private education; therefore, students are under great financial pressure to generate a positive return on their investment as soon as possible. When students encounter difficulties with their studies due to poor preparation before entering university, outside employment obligations, or personal problems the desire to cheat increases. Research conducted in nursing and midwifery training colleges indicates that "it is getting harder to get accepted into a Tertiary Institution in Ghana once you are caught," yet students will still engage in cheating due to the expense associated with failure (NMTC Berekum Repository). Therefore, in terms of economics, cheating is becoming more attractive than honest academic pursuit since students are weighing the likelihood of detection and subsequent penalty against the near certainty of failing their coursework.

Admission Irregularities and Lack of Preparation for University Work

Another factor related specifically to private universities includes the documented instances of irregular admissions processes. According to Professor Yankah's audit, approximately

twenty per cent of students at select private university colleges did not possess verifiable WASSCE records, and some institutions were admitting candidates with grades of E8 and even F9. (Yankah, 2018, Para. 20-22). It should go without saying that candidates admitted with failing grades are inherently unqualified for the rigours of university-level work. Consequently, when such candidates are subjected to assessments that require a foundation of knowledge they do not possess, they will experience extreme pressure to cheat. There are multiple ramifications of this systemic lack of preparedness. Firstly, there is a self-perpetuating cycle: institutions that accept unprepared students will either reduce standards (thereby compromising academic honesty) or see high drop-out rates (resulting in a decrease in attractiveness to prospective students). Secondly, faculty members will be compelled to award passing grades to students who have not earned such grades through legitimate academic achievement, thereby potentially encouraging faculty participation in malpractices with examinations. Finally, degree awards from institutions whose legitimacy has been compromised by proven irregularities in their admission process will lose credibility — a loss that has caused GTEC to take action against unaccredited institutions and fraudulently issued credentials.

Consequences of Examination Malpractice

The consequences of examination malpractice are numerous, wide-ranging, and extend well beyond the direct academic penalties levied upon individual students. Section 4 examines consequences at four different levels: academic, psychological, professional, and institutional.

Academic Consequences

Academic sanctions for students identified as having engaged in examination malpractice are severe. The University of Ghana's Disciplinary Actions 2025 illustrates the severity and breadth of penalties assessed to students involved in malpractices: suspension (for impersonating another person); grade Z sanctions (for unauthorized materials in possession during an exam, for copying during an exam, or for communicating with others during an exam); grade X sanctions (for unauthorized use of electronic devices during an exam); and suspensions lasting anywhere from one semester up until two academic years. (University of Ghana, 2025). Grade Z sanctions essentially negated the test results for specific courses for eighty-eight students. Additionally, twenty students were sanctioned with grade X sanctions, while fourteen students were suspended for two full academic years. (University of Ghana, 2025) These penalties are only the beginning. Records of examination malpractice remain permanent entries on a student's official academic transcript. Such a record can negatively impact a student's ability to transfer to another institution; can negatively affect standing in professional programs; and can result in disclosure of information about previous academic misconduct to future employers. In rare cases, previously awarded degrees can be revoked. Mireku et al. (2024) determined "the erosion of educational quality and devaluation of certificates" as the major impacts resulting from examination malpractice. (P. 103064). If widespread cheating diminishes the value of certificates earned honestly by all graduates, then all graduates are harmed.

Examination malpractice also has an academic impact on innocent students. When malpractice occurs without detection, cheating students receive grades they do not deserve. For example, hardworking students who have earned their honours may be displaced by the cheater. Collective punishment can also occur if

malpractice is widespread. For example, if entire cohorts have to have examination results cancelled due to malpractice, innocent students are penalised alongside guilty ones. Data from the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) indicate that in 2014, 82 per cent of one or more subjects were cancelled due to malpractice, while in 2023, 81 per cent of one or more subjects were cancelled (Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, 2024). These cancellation rates demonstrate that examination malpractice affects not only individual offenders but also the integrity of entire assessment systems.

Psychological and Social Consequences

Students caught engaging in academic dishonesty often experience significant psychological distress. Consequences include public humiliation, stigma, loss of reputation among peers and educators, and strained relationships with family members who have invested heavily in their education. The Ghana Report (2022). In 2025, the University of Ghana published the names of sanctioned students, further intensifying the long-term psychological impact. Empirical studies have also documented elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among students subjected to disciplinary actions for academic misconduct. The stress of possible suspension/expulsion, combined with shame within students' social networks, can cause serious psychological problems. A graphic reported in an editorial in 2025 that "examination malpractices compromise the fairness of assessments," therefore making it difficult for legitimate students to distinguish themselves from others who gained an advantage through systemic cheating. Therefore, legitimate students feel frustrated/psychologically distressed when they believe others are getting away with cheating. Additionally, students develop cynicism about academic values when they witness other students engage in cheating. Malpractice damages trust among students/faculty. Faculty must now be suspicious/enforcement-oriented when interacting with all students. Students who refuse to cheat but witness colleagues engaging in cheating become cynical about academic values. Students who are pressured by their peers to engage in collusion often experience moral distress. Over time, examination malpractice fosters an environment of distrust, undermining the possibility of meaningful education.

Professional and Career Consequences

The professional consequences of examination malpractice extend well beyond graduation. Mtshweni (2024) found that contract cheating leads to the misrepresentation of competence to employers and academic institutions, particularly when students outsource dissertations or thesis work. Ultimately, such deception harms both the individual who lacks the requisite knowledge and skills and the employer and client who rely on the presumed competence. Furthermore, the Private Universities Students' Association of Ghana (PUSAG) warned in 2025 that students enrolled in unaccredited institutions risk having their qualifications declared invalid. This outcome could significantly restrict their eligibility for mandatory national service and reduce their employment opportunities in both the public and private sectors. Employers increasingly conduct background checks, and a disciplinary record for examination malpractice can automatically exclude students from many positions. Professions imposing additional barriers include professional licensing. The Ghana Association of Medical Laboratory Scientists has high standards for professional registration; persons with a history of academic dishonesty may be denied registration. The General Legal Council, the Ghana Medical and Dental Council, and the Institute of

Chartered Accountants in Ghana all enforce ethical fitness requirements that may disqualify individuals with a documented history of examination malpractice. In sectors such as nursing/midwifery, licensing exams themselves have been compromised by malpractice, creating concerns regarding the competency of practitioners entering the workforce (Adjei, 2024). Most importantly, examination malpractice produces graduates who lack the skills/knowledge their degrees purported to certify. Graphic warned in 2025 of "long-term consequences: professionals unable to perform duties effectively; public servants without problem-solving abilities; a society plagued by mediocrity/corruption." When cheating students become doctors, engineers, accountants or teachers, their incompetence poses risks to public safety/welfare.

Institutional Consequences

Private universities are at risk of losing their very existence as a result of unchecked examination malpractice. Chronic examination malpractice erodes confidence in credentials, leading to decreasing enrollment numbers and financial instability. The West African Examinations Council has warned that examination malpractice has "spread throughout the Ghana Education Service and is threatening the integrity of education in Ghana" (Ansa Asare, 2025). The failure of private universities to adequately respond to malpractice will likely result in issues regarding accreditation and possibly even closures. Unlike public universities, whose baseline levels of public trust and governmental support allow them to attract students based on their reputations in a competitive market, private institutions must compete for students based on their reputations. One incident of large-scale cheating scandals will irreparably harm the image of an institution. Professor Yankah cautioned defaulting private universities that "the consequences would be disastrous for the very existence of that university" and that "the impact of such a move would be unimaginable for the affected universities as it would have implications for their subsequent admissions" (Yankah, 2018, para. 32-33; 46-48). Consequences for institutions can include the costs of investigating and adjudicating claims of malpractice. Institutions need to create disciplinary committees and hold hearings, process appeals, and maintain records of sanctions. These processes consume administrative time and resources that could be spent on teaching and research. Malpractice becomes so common that all aspects of academia become focused on enforcing standards instead of educating. Malpractice in examinations also harms relationships with other external parties. Trust among parents diminishes. Employers, who are concerned about declining graduate quality, have strained relationships. Accrediting agencies may place sanctions on institutions with integrity deficiencies. The Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) has demonstrated increased willingness to enforce academic integrity through publicly identifying and punishing institutions with integrity issues.

Contributing Factors Specifically Relating to Private Universities

Although many of the contributing factors relating to the causes and consequences of malpractice in examinations apply to the broader higher education sector, there are several contributing factors specific to private universities in Ghana that warrant separate discussion.

Issues Regarding Regulatory Oversight and Accreditation

Private Universities in Ghana are regulated by GTEC and are required to meet accreditation requirements for all programs. Vol-3, Iss-5 (May-2026)

However, enforcement of these regulations has generally been inconsistent. For example, the 2018 audit of private college/university operations identified a myriad of violations of standards and rules specifically due to a lack of consistent application of regulatory oversight. According to Professor Yankah, the reason institutions continued to engage in malpractices was "nobody had cracked the whip on them." (Yankah, 2018, paras. 22-23) Without consistent external oversight, private universities have far fewer restrictions on lowering academic standards for financial purposes. GTEC has significantly increased its enforcement activities. The Commission has taken actions against unaccredited institutions; issued warnings against fraudulently using academic titles; and developed policies to protect the "integrity of Ghana's higher education system" and "to rebuild public confidence in academic honours". (GTEC, 2025). Despite these new measures, however, over 3500 students are enrolled in unaccredited institutions. (PUSAG, 2025). Many of these students were unaware that they were attending unaccredited institutions and, therefore, did not know that they were paying for degrees that do not exist.

Commercial Pressure to Maintain Student Enrollment

As stated earlier, private universities are businesses. Therefore, they must rely on tuition revenue generated from student enrollment to fund their operations. Additionally, private universities are extremely competitive within their own peer group and with respect to attracting students away from public universities. Consequently, there exists significant pressure on private universities to retain students. When a student fails an exam or is expelled from an institution for engaging in malpractice during an exam, the institution loses a source of revenue (i.e., student tuition). This creates a conflict of interest between maintaining academic integrity and institutional viability. Evidence supporting the existence of this conflict is evident in the admission practices identified in the NAB audit report. Institutions accepted students into degree programs when those students had failed (i.e., E8 and F9 grades) primarily to increase the number of enrolled students. Similarly, if institutions are willing to sacrifice admissions standards solely to collect additional tuition dollars, then it is reasonable to assume that they may also be willing to sacrifice examination standards for similar financial reasons. There is no coincidence between admissions irregularities and examination malpractice; both occur as a result of the same institutional incentive structure.

Faculty Employment/Working Conditions

Faculty employed at private universities generally have poorer working conditions compared to their colleagues at public institutions. Lower salaries, less job security and less administrative support for teaching are common characteristics of faculty positions at private universities. Both the motivation and ability of faculty to enforce academic integrity may be negatively impacted by poor working conditions. Additionally, some private universities employ adjunct faculty on a contract basis. Adjunct faculty are frequently poorly compensated and work long hours. These faculty members may not be able or inclined to devote sufficient time to rigorous invigilation, careful plagiarism detection, or thorough investigations of suspected cheating. Furthermore, some private universities base employment decisions concerning faculty on student evaluations of instruction. Students who believe that faculty members are too rigid regarding the enforcement of examination integrity may provide low evaluations of faculty performance as a form of retaliation. Low evaluations

could negatively impact the job security of faculty members. This creates a perverse incentive for faculty to look the other way. Systematic research on this phenomenon in Ghana does not exist; however, the logic of this behaviour is consistent with previous research in other contexts where student evaluations of teaching are related to employment outcomes.

Student Demographics and Academic Preparation

Student demographics and academic preparedness of students at private universities in Ghana differ from those of public university students in ways that can increase vulnerability to exam malpractice. For example, students attending private universities typically have lower WASSCE scores than students at public universities, since the best students are admitted to public universities. Additionally, students attending private universities are more likely to work while pursuing higher education because they must fund their own tuition. As a result, the two burdens of working and school can create inadequately prepared students who will feel forced to cheat. Students at private universities are also more likely to be first-generation university students; therefore, their families are unlikely to provide the necessary academic support. While these demographic characteristics do not justify malpractice, they help to explain why students at private universities may be under more pressure to cheat than students at public universities. Like all Ghanaians seeking academic certificates, students at private universities feel the same societal pressure for academic credentials; however, unlike students at public universities, students at private universities generally have fewer legitimate means to satisfy that pressure (fewer hours available to study, fewer hours available to prepare academically before starting college).

Path to Academic Integrity: A Mitigation Framework

Mitigating exam malpractice in Ghana's private universities requires a comprehensive and multi-pronged strategy that addresses both the underlying causes and symptoms of the problem. Mireku et al. (2024) found that "promoting educational values and examination ethics" was the most effective strategy identified across the studies reviewed. This section, therefore, integrates evidence-based approaches to develop a comprehensive framework.

Developing Stronger Institutional Frameworks and Policies

Institutional frameworks and policies must be clearly defined and consistently enforced across higher education institutions. In particular, such frameworks should:

1. Clearly define behaviours that constitute academic misconduct.
2. Establish procedures for investigating allegations of misconduct.
3. Specify a range of sanctions for violations of academic integrity, distinguishing between first and subsequent offences.
4. Provide formal mechanisms for appealing disciplinary decisions.
5. Be reviewed periodically to address evolving forms of academic dishonesty.

For instance, Bervell (2025) demonstrates that many university policies in Ghana lack sufficient definitional clarity regarding contract cheating, thereby limiting their effectiveness in preventing such practices. Therefore, private universities should incorporate this evidence when developing their own policies. In

addition, the development process needs to be inclusive of all stakeholders (i.e., faculty, administration, students, parents, etc.), so that everyone understands and supports the final product. The Ghana Tertiary Education Commission provides regulatory guidelines which should be included. Universities such as the University of Ghana, KNUST, and Ashesi University provide examples of broad-ranging academic integrity policies that can serve as models for private universities. Finally, institutional policies need to be made publicly accessible. Gunu and Amua-Sekyi (2016) discovered that although 92% of Ghana's students claimed knowledge of existing academic integrity policies, only 31% rated themselves knowledgeable. Clearly, publishing policies is merely the beginning; it is equally important for institutions to actively educate their constituents regarding the existence and implementation of their policies.

Improving Examination Monitoring/Invigilation

Monitoring examinations through effective invigilation is one of the strongest deterrents against academic dishonesty. Studies carried out by KNUST have shown that "invigilation headed by lecturers constitutes a vital mechanism for maintaining academic integrity." Private universities should engage in providing extensive training programs for invigilators concerning:

1. How to recognise various types of academic dishonesty during exams.
2. Proper methods for handling suspicion of academic dishonesty without creating confrontations.
3. Methods for using technology to detect cheating (e.g., ultraviolet light detectors, devices capable of detecting electronic devices).
4. Ethical obligations of invigilators (reporting requirements).
5. Conflicts of Interest Management.

The seminar series provided by the KNUST Registrar's Office has been created specifically to equip senior staff with the skills needed to "deal effectively with cases of examination malpractices." Similar professional development initiatives should be developed by private universities. In terms of practical invigilation techniques, include:

1. Increasing the number of invigilators per student.
2. Implementing randomised seating plans.
3. Requiring students to sit next to photographs bearing ID cards.
4. Conduct thorough searches before each examination.
5. Prevent the introduction of unauthorised materials into examination venues.
6. Implement multiple versions of examinations (with varying question orders or sets) to reduce the potential advantages of leaked materials or collusion among students.

Leverage Technology to Prevent/Detect Malpractice

Technology is increasingly becoming a method for committing academic dishonesty and also a tool for preventing/detecting it. Private universities should purposefully implement technological tools to deter/prevent malpractice:

- Use plagiarism-detection software (such as Turnitin or iThenticate) on all written assignments (course papers, capstone projects, thesis) submitted by students.
- Integrate student access to plagiarism-detection software with assignment submission portals.

- Require users to complete training courses on proper citation prior to accessing plagiarism-detection software.
- Use digital examination platforms to randomly reorder questions and/or answers on exams to make it harder for students to collaborate/cooperate.
- Utilise exam-management systems to protect question-setting/printing processes, thereby decreasing the likelihood of material leaks.
- Randomly order questions within examinations presented digitally.
- Utilise technology-enabled assessment platforms.

Technology like fingerprint and facial recognition could make it difficult for someone else to take your exam. It may be expensive, however, when you consider how important many exams are, especially for professional licenses, it may be cost-effective. For some private universities which have the resources to do so, this type of technology is definitely worth looking at. There is also more affordable AI-powered proctoring technology that is increasingly available. Many of these types of programs can track what a student does on their computer or device while they are taking an online exam and report anything unusual to a person who can then review whether the activity was normal or if it indicates that something improper occurred. In 2025, NewsGhana published an article titled "How to Prevent Examination Malpractices Using Innovative Technological Solutions", highlighting measures such as biometric authentication, AI-powered proctoring, digital assessment platforms, plagiarism detection software, and blockchain-based systems. Even though no one expects private universities to use all of these types of technology right now, there is a wide range of choices for implementing different levels of technological measures to improve integrity. At the same time, we need to recognise that technology is not enough. Cheating students can always find ways to get around detection technology, and students are quick learners. Therefore, technology needs to be incorporated into a larger system of integrity.

Educational Interventions and Ethical Awareness Programs

Mireku et al. (2024) identified that "educational values and examination ethics were found as the most effective strategies used among the studies." As a result, private universities should develop orientation programs for first-time students that focus on academic integrity. Examples would include defining prohibited behaviour, explaining why academic integrity policies exist and providing explanations about the consequences for violating those policies. While orientation programs should provide the foundation for educating students regarding ethical behaviour, ongoing education about topics related to ethical thinking, study habits, managing time and reducing stress should occur throughout a student's matriculation. Teaching faculty to integrate discussion about academic integrity into their curriculum and create assignments that require more than just memorisation of information should also be part of a university's efforts to promote academic integrity. Specifically, private universities need to address the misconception, as identified by Gunu and Amua Sekyi (2016), that cheating with the knowledge of another party is not misconduct. This finding highlights a critical gap in students' ethical understanding that requires attention through structured and systemic education. While 92% of respondents indicated awareness of their institution's regulatory processes, only 31% reported having a strong understanding of those processes. This disparity suggests a significant disconnect between students' awareness and

their actual comprehension of institutional regulations. That gap needs to be addressed.

Student Support Services

Some students commit malpractice because they feel desperate. Those feelings arise due to either a lack of preparation academically or intellectually for their course material; pressure from other people or family obligations, financial difficulties, or emotional/mental health struggles. To alleviate some of that desperation, private universities should provide support service programs for students that include:

- Tutoring services for students who struggle with specific subjects
- Writing centres where students can learn legitimate research techniques and writing skills
- Counselling services for students experiencing mental health issues
- Workshops focused on developing time management skills and study skills
- Financial assistance programs (such as scholarships and work-study opportunities) to assist students with paying bills
- Academic advising sessions and open office hours for students with their professors.

Having access to support services helps students avoid the desperation associated with cheating. If students know that there are alternatives to cheating (i.e., getting tutoring), they are less likely to engage in that form of dishonesty. Rather than viewing student support services as an additional expense, private universities should view them as investments in maintaining academic integrity.

Consistent Enforcement and Meaningful Sanctions

Ultimately, any integrity program requires consistent enforcement. Penalties imposed upon cheating students must be fair and consistently enforced across all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status or affiliation with their institution. Failure to enforce penalties consistently undermines the credibility of integrity programmes and fosters the perception that rules can be manipulated. Evidence of the limited effectiveness of existing deterrents is reflected in the rise of examination malpractice cases in Ghana from 10,000 in 2021 to 44,586 in 2023 (Ansa Asare, 2025). Sanctions should therefore be applied progressively, becoming more stringent with repeated offences, and must be sufficiently severe to deter unethical behaviour. The University of Ghana (2025) provides an example of a structured, progressive sanctions framework. Specifically: expelling students found guilty of impersonation; grading a student as "Z" (a failing grade) when a student is found with unauthorised materials during an examination; grading a student as "X" (a failing grade) for bringing electronic equipment into an examination room; suspending a student for disrupting order in an examination room; etc. Sanction structures must include mechanisms for investigating allegations involving employees as well as students. Bribery of invigilators, leaking examination questions by employees, and collusion between employees and students are commonly cited areas of concern. The Ministry of Education in Ghana has issued warnings indicating that employees found to be involved in facilitating examination malpractice will face dismissal and possible imprisonment (Apaak, 2025). Therefore, private universities must institute formalised mechanisms for reporting employee involvement in malpractice and subsequently enforcing meaningful

sanctions upon those employees when evidence confirms their involvement.

Institutional Accountability and Transparency

To enhance accountability for addressing malpractice, private universities should establish permanent academic integrity committees composed of faculty members, administrative personnel, and students. Those committees will be responsible for investigating complaints of malpractice; recommending sanctions upon individuals found guilty of malpractice; meeting regularly to review past cases; identifying trends, and making recommendations concerning changes in policy.

Conclusion

Examining Malpractices undermines the validity of Higher Education in Ghana and has the potential to damage the reputation of private universities. There are many possible reasons why students engage in these activities: social pressure to obtain certificates, reliance on academic achievements to get jobs, lack of adequate supervisory oversight, weak academic misconduct policies, technology facilitating malpractices, inconsistent application of sanctions, and a dangerous trend towards accepting dishonest behaviour. The impacts of these behaviours are extensive: academic failures for individual students, emotional distress, diminished career opportunities for individuals, and institutional reputational crises that could result in catastrophic loss of confidence. However, there is reason to believe that a method exists to combat these problems. Improved institutional frameworks, strengthened supervisory controls, increased strategic use of technology, continuous development of ethical values among students, enhanced support systems for those experiencing academic challenges, and the consistent application of sanctions can collectively foster a culture of academic integrity. Indeed, Mireku et al. (2024) note that "the discoveries and proposals contained in this review greatly enhance current attempts to halt the expansion of examination malpractice in the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region" (p. 103064).

Recommendations for Private Universities in Ghana

Based upon available literature, the following recommendations represent a reasonable first step toward creating a culture of academic integrity:

1. Develop and adopt a complete Academic Integrity Policy that is approved by your institution's governing body; communicate the policy clearly to all parties involved; and conduct a yearly evaluation.
2. Invest in a training program for Invigilation procedures and policies, and provide invigilators with information about managing conflicts of interest and meeting their obligations regarding academic integrity; model your program after KNUST's Seminar Series.
3. Use plagiarism-detection software for all written assignments (including thesis and dissertation work), and require training for all students to properly cite sources.

Future Research Directions

There are still significant research gaps identified above. Future studies should: Conduct Empirical Studies on Examination Malpractices, specifically within Ghana's Private Universities Including Large Scale Surveys of Students' Perceptions, Behaviors, and Motivations; Evaluate Specific Interventions (Technology Based Detection Systems/Educational Programs/Policy Changes

etc.) Using Rigorous Quasi Experimental Designs; Research Faculty Members' Behavior as Enablers/Deterrents of Examination Malpractices Including How Employment Conditions Affect Their Ability to Enforce Integrity Policies; Determine if Admission Standards Influence Examination Malpractices To Understand the Pathways From Irregular Admissions to Dishonest Exams; Analyze Long Term Outcomes for Students Sanctioned for Malpractices To Include Their Completion Rates, Post Graduation Employment Opportunities, Success in Obtaining Professional Licenses; Use Choice Modeling/Cost-Benefit Analysis to Determine Economic Logic of Cheating Decisions And Inform Design Of Deterrents

Authors Contribution

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

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

K.K.Y: Conceptualisation and methodology formulation

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