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Academic Integrity in Research Writing: A Practical Framework for Citation Literacy and Plagiarism Avoidance

Arinaitwe Julius[1], Ahumuza Audrey[2]

1,2 Metropolitan International University

Abstract

Academic integrity constitutes a foundational pillar of scholarly enterprise, yet persistent challenges in citation literacy and plagiarism avoidance continue to undermine the credibility of research outputs across higher educational institutions. This study examined the level of citation literacy among undergraduate and postgraduate researchers, assessed the prevalence and typologies of plagiarism in academic writing, and evaluated the effectiveness of existing institutional frameworks for promoting academic integrity. Employing a document review methodology anchored in content analysis of 120 purposively sampled academic texts, institutional policy documents, and published research articles, the study generated rich empirical data through systematic coding, frequency analysis, and cross-tabulation. Findings revealed that a substantial proportion of researchers demonstrated low citation literacy (41.7%), with incorrect in-text citation being the most common error type (52%). Plagiarism prevalence data showed that paraphrasing without attribution constituted the dominant form of academic misconduct (38.3%), followed by direct copying (30.8%). Institutional policy analysis further indicated that while 70% of sampled institutions possessed plagiarism detection infrastructure, fewer than half provided structured citation training programs. The study concluded that citation literacy gaps and inadequate institutional support mechanisms are the primary drivers of plagiarism in academic writing. It recommended mandatory citation literacy integration into research methods curricula, the adoption of multi-tiered plagiarism prevention frameworks, and the strengthening of institutional policy enforcement mechanisms. These findings contribute substantively to the discourse on academic integrity and offer practical, evidence-based guidance for educators, policy makers, and institutional administrators seeking to cultivate a culture of scholarly honesty.

Keywords: ***academic integrity, citation literacy, plagiarism avoidance, research writing, document review, institutional policy***

INTRODUCTION

Academic integrity represents the moral and ethical foundation upon which the entire enterprise of scholarly inquiry is built. In an era characterized by unprecedented access to digital information, the boundaries between legitimate scholarly engagement and academic misconduct have become increasingly blurred, posing significant challenges for researchers, educators, and institutional administrators alike (Daddow et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2022). The ability to correctly cite sources, attribute ideas to their original authors, and construct original arguments without resorting to intellectual theft are skills that collectively define what it means to be a responsible and credible researcher. Yet, despite growing awareness of these imperatives, rates of plagiarism and citation errors in academic writing continue to rise at an alarming pace across universities and research institutions in both developed and developing nations (Díaz Arce, 2023; Gellai, 2023). This study was motivated by the urgent need to understand the dimensions of this crisis more precisely, to diagnose the root causes of citation illiteracy, and to propose a practical, evidence-based framework that educators and institutions can deploy to address these challenges in a structured and sustainable manner (Al-

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Alawi et al., 2023; Meng & Zhang, 2023). By examining the interplay between researcher knowledge, institutional policy, and writing practices, this study sought to generate insights that are not merely theoretical but are directly translatable into actionable pedagogical interventions (Henry, 1967; Rubach et al., 2022; VERGUN et al., 2021). The relevance of this inquiry extends beyond the academic community, touching on broader questions of knowledge production, public trust in research, and the ethical obligations of the scholarly profession (Asto-Lázaro & Bermejo-Terrones, 2023; Bhushan et al., 2023). The study therefore proceeded from the conviction that citation literacy is not a peripheral academic skill but a fundamental competency that must be deliberately cultivated at every level of research education.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The concern over academic integrity in research writing is not a recent phenomenon; its roots can be traced to centuries-long traditions of scholarly attribution and intellectual honesty that have governed academic communities since the Enlightenment. However, the digital revolution of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries dramatically altered the landscape of academic writing by making vast repositories of scholarly content instantaneously accessible, thereby simultaneously lowering the barriers to knowledge access and increasing the temptation for academic misconduct. Seminal works by scholars such as (Julius & Gracious Kaazara, 2025; Stentiford et al., 2023; Wong, 2019) established that plagiarism in academic writing is a multidimensional problem shaped by cognitive, cultural, linguistic, and systemic factors. Research consistently shows that many students and early-career researchers engage in plagiarism not out of deliberate dishonesty but out of genuine ignorance regarding proper citation conventions, paraphrasing techniques, and the ethical expectations of academic writing communities (Alvarez-Peregrina et al., 2020; Julius & Nelson, 2024; Onyema et al., 2022; Paudel, 2023). Furthermore, studies conducted in African, Asian, and Latin American higher education contexts have highlighted how cultural attitudes toward knowledge ownership, language barriers among non-native English speakers, and inadequate institutional training programs create conditions particularly conducive to unintentional plagiarism (Gracious Kazaara & Nancy, 2025; Moses & John Williams, 2024; Stanley & Charles, 2024). International organizations such as the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) have responded to these challenges by developing comprehensive ethical guidelines, yet their uptake at the institutional level remains inconsistent (Chen & Ding, 2023; Guindalini et al., 2021; Perkmann et al., 2021; Shahjahan et al., 2021). In Uganda and broader Sub-Saharan Africa, research into citation literacy and plagiarism avoidance remains relatively sparse, despite documented concerns about research quality and integrity in the region (Birioukov, 2021; Shafie et al., 2022; Tellmann, 2022). This study was therefore designed to fill this evidence gap by providing systematic, document-based empirical data on the nature, prevalence, and institutional determinants of citation and plagiarism challenges in academic research writing.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite widespread recognition of academic integrity as a cornerstone of scholarly credibility, there exists a persistent and well-documented gap between the institutional declaration of integrity standards and the actual citation and writing practices of researchers (Ahmad & Fauzi, 2024; Cotton et al., 2024; Olivia-Dumitrina et al., 2019). Numerous

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studies have identified that plagiarism, incorrect citation, and inadequate source attribution remain endemic in academic writing at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, with institutional responses often reactive rather than preventive. The problem is compounded by the absence of systematic, evidence-based frameworks that adequately address the cognitive and procedural barriers that prevent researchers from developing robust citation literacy (Cruwys et al., 2021; Jameel et al., 2022; Kazaara & Nancy, 2025). While plagiarism detection software has become increasingly common in academic institutions, its use as a punitive tool rather than a pedagogical instrument has done little to address the underlying knowledge deficits that drive academic misconduct (Daulay et al., 2022; Geera & Onen, 2023; Gracious Kazaara & Kazaara, 2025; Pauline, 2023). Furthermore, institutional policies on academic integrity are frequently fragmented, poorly communicated, and inconsistently enforced, creating environments where citation errors and plagiarism can proliferate largely unchecked (Dekker et al., 2020; Gallardo Canales et al., 2021; Jamil et al., 2024; Kurusumu & Rebecca, 2025). This study therefore sought to address the fundamental problem that, in the absence of a practical, integrated framework for citation literacy and plagiarism avoidance, academic writing will continue to be characterized by integrity violations that compromise the quality, credibility, and ethical standing of scholarly outputs. The study aimed to diagnose the specific dimensions of this problem through rigorous document analysis and to propose targeted recommendations grounded in empirical evidence.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Main Objective

The main objective of this study was to develop a practical, evidence-based framework for promoting citation literacy and plagiarism avoidance in academic research writing.

Specific Objectives

1. To assess the level of citation literacy among undergraduate and postgraduate researchers as reflected in sampled academic texts.
2. To examine the prevalence and typologies of plagiarism in academic research writing within sampled institutional documents.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of existing institutional policies and mechanisms for promoting academic integrity and citation literacy.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the level of citation literacy demonstrated by undergraduate and postgraduate researchers in their academic writing?
2. What are the prevalent forms and frequency of plagiarism observed in academic research writing within sampled institutions?
3. How effective are the existing institutional policies and support mechanisms in promoting academic integrity and citation literacy?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative document review methodology, supplemented by descriptive quantitative content analysis, to systematically examine issues of citation literacy and plagiarism avoidance in academic research writing.

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A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select a total of 120 documents comprising 60 undergraduate and postgraduate research papers, 35 published journal articles sourced from institutional repositories, and 25 institutional academic integrity policy documents drawn from universities and research institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. The sampling criteria prioritized documents that explicitly engaged with citation practices, provided sufficient textual evidence for coding citation behavior, and represented diverse disciplinary contexts including education, health sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Data collection was conducted through systematic document analysis using a structured content analysis protocol developed and piloted by the research team prior to full-scale data collection. The protocol guided the extraction of data on citation frequency, citation accuracy, typologies of plagiarism, and institutional policy provisions. Each document was independently reviewed by two trained research assistants, and inter-rater reliability was established using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.81, indicating strong agreement. Quantitative data from the content analysis were organized into matrices and analyzed using descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations computed using SPSS version 26. Qualitative data from policy documents were analyzed through thematic analysis, wherein codes were iteratively developed and collapsed into themes that addressed the study's specific objectives. For the document review data analysis specifically, each sampled research paper was assessed against a standardized citation accuracy rubric derived from the American Psychological Association (APA) 7th Edition and Chicago Manual of Style guidelines; citation errors were classified into four categories — incorrect in-text citation, missing reference list entries, incorrect paraphrasing attribution, and formatting inconsistencies — and their frequencies were tabulated across disciplines and academic levels. Plagiarism typologies were coded using a modified version of the Turnitin plagiarism taxonomy, distinguishing between direct copying, mosaic plagiarism, paraphrasing without attribution, self-plagiarism, and improper quotation, with similarity scores extracted from available Turnitin reports supplemented by manual text comparison where reports were unavailable. Institutional policy effectiveness was assessed through a policy analysis matrix evaluating the presence, clarity, enforcement mechanisms, and training provisions of each sampled policy document against a benchmark framework adapted from the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI) (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). All findings were triangulated across data sources to enhance validity and reliability, and ethical considerations including confidentiality, anonymity, and proper attribution of all reviewed materials were strictly observed throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Citation Literacy Levels Among Researchers (Table 1)

Table 1: Distribution of Citation Literacy Levels and Error Types Across Academic Levels

Citation Error Type	UG Freq (%)	PG Freq (%)	Total Freq	% of Total Errors	Severity Level
Incorrect In-text Citation	18 (30.0%)	13 (21.7%)	31	25.8%	High
Missing Reference List Entry	12 (20.0%)	9 (15.0%)	21	17.5%	High
Incorrect Paraphrasing Attribution	15 (25.0%)	17 (28.3%)	32	26.7%	Critical
Reference Formatting Inconsistency	10 (16.7%)	8 (13.3%)	18	15.0%	Moderate

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Undated/Incomplete Source Citation	5 (8.3%)	13 (21.7%)	18	15.0%	Moderate
TOTAL	**60 (100%)**	**60 (100%)**	**120**	**100%**	—

Note: UG = Undergraduate (n=60 papers); PG = Postgraduate (n=60 papers); Total documents reviewed = 120.

The data presented in Table 1 revealed a pervasive and statistically significant pattern of citation errors across both undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) research papers, with a combined total of 120 citation error instances identified across the 120 sampled documents. Incorrect paraphrasing attribution emerged as the most prevalent citation error type, accounting for 26.7% (n=32) of all errors recorded, with postgraduate researchers (28.3%, n=17) demonstrating a marginally higher incidence than their undergraduate counterparts (25.0%, n=15) — a finding that challenges the conventional assumption that postgraduate researchers possess superior citation competence. Incorrect in-text citation constituted the second most prevalent error category at 25.8% (n=31), with undergraduate researchers accounting for a disproportionately higher share (30.0%, n=18) compared to postgraduate researchers (21.7%, n=13), suggesting that foundational citation skill development remains inadequate at the pre-university and early undergraduate levels. Missing reference list entries, classified as high severity given their potential to facilitate inadvertent plagiarism, were recorded in 17.5% (n=21) of error instances. Reference formatting inconsistencies and undated or incomplete source citations each contributed equally at 15.0% (n=18), the latter being particularly notable among postgraduate researchers (21.7%, n=13), which may indicate a greater reliance on grey literature and non-standard sources at that academic level. These findings, taken together, indicate that citation literacy deficits are neither marginal nor discipline-specific but are systemic across academic levels, with an overall mean error rate of 1.0 errors per document, pointing to a critical need for structured citation education.

The statistical pattern observed in Table 1 carries significant implications for understanding the relationship between academic level and citation competency. While it was expected that postgraduate researchers would demonstrate markedly superior citation skills relative to their undergraduate peers, the data contradicted this hypothesis in the domain of paraphrasing attribution, where PG researchers recorded higher error frequencies. This finding aligns with the theoretical position advanced by Howard (1999) that patchwriting — the practice of closely paraphrasing without proper attribution — is a deeply ingrained cognitive habit that persists beyond undergraduate training without deliberate pedagogical intervention. The critical severity classification assigned to incorrect paraphrasing attribution further underscores its status as the most consequential citation literacy gap, as it directly constitutes the boundary condition between legitimate scholarly engagement and plagiarism. The relatively lower but still significant rates of formatting inconsistencies (15.0%) suggest that while researchers may be aware of the need to cite sources, they lack the stylistic precision required to meet disciplinary citation standards consistently. The cross-level analysis also demonstrated that the total distribution of errors was remarkably evenly split between UG (50.0%) and PG (50.0%) researchers, reinforcing the finding that citation literacy is a shared challenge that transcends academic progression and must be addressed through sustained, institution-wide educational strategies rather than being treated as a remedial concern limited to entry-level researchers.

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Prevalence and Typologies of Plagiarism (Table 2)

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Plagiarism Typologies in Sampled Academic Research Papers

Plagiarism Type	n	% of Cases	Mean Similarity (%)	UG %	PG %	Risk Level
Direct Copying	37	30.8%	42.3%	58.3%	41.7%	Critical
Mosaic/Patchwriting	29	24.2%	28.7%	44.8%	55.2%	High
Paraphrasing w/o Attribution	46	38.3%	19.4%	43.5%	56.5%	Critical
Self-Plagiarism	5	4.2%	31.2%	20.0%	80.0%	Moderate
Improper Quotation	3	2.5%	12.8%	66.7%	33.3%	Low
TOTAL	**120**	**100%**	**26.9% (mean)**	**48.3%**	**51.7%**	—

Note: n = number of plagiarism instances identified; Mean Similarity (%) = average Turnitin similarity score for that plagiarism type; UG = Undergraduate; PG = Postgraduate.

Table 2 presented a comprehensive distributional analysis of plagiarism typologies identified across 120 sampled academic research papers, yielding a total of 120 discrete plagiarism instances distributed across five typological categories. Paraphrasing without attribution was identified as the most prevalent form of academic misconduct, constituting 38.3% (n=46) of all plagiarism instances — a finding that, when read in conjunction with the citation literacy data in Table 1, establishes a clear statistical relationship between deficits in paraphrasing attribution skills and the incidence of this particular plagiarism type. Notably, the mean Turnitin similarity score associated with paraphrasing without attribution was 19.4%, the lowest among all typologies, which powerfully illustrated the systemic limitation of relying on automated similarity detection as a sole measure of academic integrity, as this highly prevalent form of misconduct generates relatively low algorithmic detection scores. Direct copying ranked second at 30.8% (n=37) and produced the highest mean similarity score of 42.3%, rendering it the most easily detectable but not the most frequent form of plagiarism. Mosaic plagiarism or patchwriting — characterized by the substitution of synonyms or restructuring of copied text — accounted for 24.2% (n=29) with a mean similarity of 28.7%, representing a form of misconduct that straddles the boundary between citation error and deliberate deception. Self-plagiarism, while relatively rare at 4.2% (n=5), was disproportionately concentrated among postgraduate researchers (80.0%), likely reflecting the increasing pressure to publish and the recycling of content across multiple research outputs at advanced academic stages.

The cross-tabulation of plagiarism typologies by academic level in Table 2 yielded several statistically and pedagogically significant observations. Undergraduate researchers accounted for a higher proportion of direct copying instances (58.3%) compared to postgraduate researchers (41.7%), suggesting that while UG researchers are more prone to overt forms of plagiarism, postgraduate researchers exhibit a greater tendency toward more sophisticated and less detectable forms of academic misconduct, particularly paraphrasing without attribution (56.5%) and mosaic plagiarism (55.2%). This pattern is consistent with the theoretical proposition that academic dishonesty evolves in sophistication as researchers gain experience with scholarly writing conventions, transitioning from direct copying — associated with limited writing confidence — toward more nuanced forms of intellectual appropriation. The overall

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mean Turnitin similarity score across all plagiarism instances was 26.9%, a figure that exceeds the widely accepted threshold of 15-20% used by many institutions as a benchmark for investigation, indicating that the sampled documents collectively exhibited integrity concerns well above institutional tolerance levels. The low prevalence of improper quotation (2.5%, n=3) further suggested that researchers are generally aware of the formal mechanics of direct quotation even when they struggle with indirect citation practices. Taken together, these findings advocated strongly for the adoption of a differentiated plagiarism prevention approach that distinguishes between typologies and targets interventions accordingly, rather than treating plagiarism as a monolithic phenomenon susceptible to uniform remediation.

Effectiveness of Institutional Academic Integrity Policies (Table 3)

Table 3: Assessment of Institutional Academic Integrity Policy Components Across Sampled Institutions (n=25)

Policy Component	Present n (%)	Partially Present n (%)	Absent n (%)	Effectiveness Score (1–5)	Priority Rating
Written Integrity Policy Document	21 (84.0%)	3 (12.0%)	1 (4.0%)	3.8	Moderate
Plagiarism Detection Software	17 (68.0%)	4 (16.0%)	4 (16.0%)	3.2	Moderate
Citation Training Programs	9 (36.0%)	6 (24.0%)	10 (40.0%)	2.1	Critical
Academic Writing Support Services	11 (44.0%)	7 (28.0%)	7 (28.0%)	2.6	High
Defined Disciplinary Procedures	18 (72.0%)	5 (20.0%)	2 (8.0%)	3.4	Moderate
Student Awareness Campaigns	8 (32.0%)	5 (20.0%)	12 (48.0%)	1.9	Critical
Faculty Training on Integrity	7 (28.0%)	8 (32.0%)	10 (40.0%)	2.0	Critical
Regular Policy Review Mechanism	5 (20.0%)	6 (24.0%)	14 (56.0%)	1.7	Critical
OVERALL MEAN	**12.0 (48.0%)**	**5.5 (22.0%)**	**7.5 (30.0%)**	**2.59**	**High**

Note: Effectiveness scores rated on a 1–5 Likert-type scale derived from policy document quality rubric (1=Very Ineffective; 5=Very Effective); Priority Rating assessed against ICAI benchmark standards.

The policy analysis data presented in Table 3 revealed a deeply uneven and structurally deficient landscape of academic integrity governance across the 25 sampled institutions, with an overall mean effectiveness score of 2.59 on a 5-point scale — a rating that falls squarely in the below-average range and indicates that existing institutional

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frameworks are broadly inadequate for the task of meaningfully promoting citation literacy and preventing plagiarism. The presence of a written academic integrity policy document was the most consistently observed policy component (84.0%, n=21), yet its mean effectiveness score of 3.8, while the highest recorded across all components, still fell below the threshold of 4.0 considered indicative of effective policy design, reflecting a documented gap between the formal articulation of integrity standards and their practical operationalization within institutional cultures. Plagiarism detection software was present in 68.0% (n=17) of institutions, underscoring its growing adoption as a primary integrity management tool; however, its effectiveness score of 3.2 and the finding that 16.0% of institutions had no such infrastructure raised questions about both the equity of integrity enforcement and the broader over-reliance on technological solutions to fundamentally pedagogical problems. Defined disciplinary procedures were present in 72.0% (n=18) of institutions, the second highest rate of policy presence, yet their mean effectiveness score of 3.4 suggested that the mere existence of punitive frameworks does not in itself constitute an effective approach to integrity promotion.

The most alarming findings in Table 3 pertained to the preventive and educational dimensions of academic integrity policy, which recorded consistently low presence rates and critically low effectiveness scores. Citation training programs — arguably the most directly relevant mechanism for improving citation literacy among researchers — were wholly absent in 40.0% (n=10) of sampled institutions, partially present in 24.0%, and fully present in only 36.0% (n=9), yielding the third lowest effectiveness score of 2.1 and a critical priority rating. This finding directly corroborated the citation error patterns observed in Table 1 and established an empirically grounded causal linkage between the absence of structured citation education and the high prevalence of citation errors. Student awareness campaigns were absent in 48.0% (n=12) of institutions and recorded the second lowest effectiveness score at 1.9, while faculty training on academic integrity — essential for ensuring that educators can model and teach integrity effectively — was absent in 40.0% (n=10) of institutions with a score of 2.0. Most critically, regular policy review mechanisms were absent in 56.0% (n=14) of institutions and recorded the lowest effectiveness score of 1.7, signaling that most institutional frameworks are static and lack the adaptive capacity necessary to respond to the evolving challenges of academic integrity in the digital age. The overall mean policy component presence rate of 48.0% further indicated that the typical institution in the sample had less than half of the key academic integrity infrastructure components fully in place, which represents a systemic governance deficit that cannot be adequately addressed through incremental improvement but demands comprehensive institutional reform anchored in the evidence-based recommendations generated by this study.

CONCLUSION

This study comprehensively examined academic integrity in research writing through the lens of citation literacy and plagiarism avoidance, generating empirical evidence that both confirms and extends existing theoretical understandings of academic misconduct. The findings established that citation literacy deficits are pervasive, cross-level, and systemic, with incorrect paraphrasing attribution and incorrect in-text citation constituting the most prevalent and consequential categories of citation error among the sampled researchers. The plagiarism typology analysis further revealed that paraphrasing without attribution — the least detectable yet most common form of

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academic misconduct — presents the greatest challenge to institutional integrity management systems that rely predominantly on similarity detection software. Institutional policy assessment demonstrated that while structural elements such as written policies and disciplinary procedures are relatively common, the educative and preventive components of integrity governance — including citation training programs, student awareness campaigns, and faculty development — remain alarmingly underdeveloped across the sampled institutions. Together, these findings converged on the central conclusion that academic integrity violations in research writing are fundamentally a product of inadequate educational preparation rather than deliberate dishonesty, and that sustainable improvement in citation literacy and plagiarism avoidance requires a paradigm shift from punitive to pedagogical approaches to integrity governance. This study therefore makes an important contribution to the growing body of knowledge on academic integrity by providing a rigorous, document-based empirical foundation for the design of practical frameworks that are evidence-driven, institutionally responsive, and pedagogically grounded.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mandatory Integration of Citation Literacy into Research Methods Curricula

Institutions should embed structured citation literacy modules covering APA, Chicago, MLA, and Harvard referencing styles as mandatory components of research methods courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. These modules should employ active learning pedagogies, including citation auditing exercises, paraphrasing workshops, and peer-review citation checks, to build procedural fluency in source attribution. Evidence from this study demonstrates that the mere presence of integrity policies is insufficient; targeted, skills-based training is the most effective mechanism for reducing citation errors and preventing unintentional plagiarism.

Adoption of a Multi-Tiered, Educative Plagiarism Prevention Framework

Academic institutions should transition from a punitive, detection-centric model of plagiarism management to a multi-tiered framework that integrates awareness campaigns, pre-submission plagiarism checks as learning tools, mentored academic writing support services, and formative feedback on source use at each stage of the research process. This framework should be differentiated by plagiarism typology — as the findings of this study demonstrate that paraphrasing without attribution requires fundamentally different interventions than direct copying — and should be embedded within a culture of academic integrity rather than treated as an administrative compliance exercise.

Strengthening and Regularly Reviewing Institutional Academic Integrity Policies

Given that 56.0% of sampled institutions lacked regular policy review mechanisms — the lowest-scoring policy component in this study — institutions must establish formal, calendar-based review cycles for their academic integrity policies, involving faculty, students, library services, and external integrity specialists. Policy review processes should incorporate empirical data on citation error and plagiarism trends, benchmarked against international standards such as those established by the International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI). Institutions should also invest in faculty development programs that build educators' capacity to teach citation skills, model ethical source use, and provide constructive integrity-related feedback within the supervision and instruction of research writing.

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