

Undergraduate Students' Understanding of Plagiarism: Lesson from Students Pursuing Education Programmes at Mzumbe University (MU)

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Abstract

This study examines students' understanding of plagiarism in universities in Tanzania using the case of Mzumbe University. A single case study design and a mixed approach were employed. The study population of 211 students pursuing education programmes was involved, and a sample of 72 students was obtained using stratified and purposive sampling techniques. Data obtained was analysed using SPSS and the content analysis technique. Results revealed little understanding of what constitutes plagiarism by 57 (79%) of the total respondents. Major forms of plagiarism identified by respondents were source-based 27 (38%), and direct plagiarism 20 (28%). Causes of plagiarism pinpointed by respondents were laziness 52 (71.6%), poor time management 43 (59.7%), difficult assignments 53 (73.6%), and unawareness of penalties associated with plagiarism 38 (51.8%). This study recommends that all undergraduate works should be subjected to plagiarism check, the University should develop a plagiarism policy, and that plagiarism is taught as a topic to students.

Keywords: Plagiarism, Anti-plagiarism software, Academic dishonesty, Types of plagiarism.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism is one of the major forms of academic dishonesty in universities. It started to be used in 40-102 AD by the Roman Poet Martial who was trying to protect his creation against people who attempted to steal his words and claim to be theirs (Kolich, 1983). Despite its long history, the term started to be popular in the 17th century (Kolich, 1983). Authors such as Lai & Weeks (2009), consider it as an academic crime whereas some view it as a moral evil, copyright infringement, poor scientific practices, and mental illness. In the 18th century, plagiarism was clearly defined to include the protection of authors' copyright. In the more recent years, plagiarism has been taken as an aspect of academic dishonesty or misconduct, and penalties for being found guilty of it are usually very serious in developed countries (De Jager & Brown,

2010). Among the penalties which have been listed are, public reprimands, failing a course, obtaining zero marks, suspension or expulsion from the university (Mainka & Raeburn, 2006).

The incidences of plagiarism are accelerated with increased access to online resources where copying and pasting are easy (De- Jager & Brown, 2010). Like in other countries, Tanzania's higher learning institutions experience incidences of plagiarism. As a result, the Tanzanian government through the Tanzania Commission of Universities (TCU) has started to give attention to plagiarism (Mbilinyi, & Msuya, 2018) by directing all universities to acquire plagiarism software ((TCU, 2019). Mzumbe University (MU) started to implement TCU guidelines officially in 2016 by acquiring plagiarism software which is used for checking postgraduate students' scholarly works.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Testing of plagiarism among undergraduate students is a relatively unexplored field in most of the counties in Africa (Chrysler-Fox & Thomas (2017). Sarlauskiene and Stabingis (2014) opined that students in most African universities lack an understanding of plagiarism as their countries do not have any legal Acts, civil, criminal, or administrative codes which regard plagiarism as an academic offence. Radunovich, Baugh, & Turner (2009) noted that the majority of universities lack an understanding of what constitutes plagiarism. Lack of understanding of plagiarism has led to increased plagiarism (Tayraukham, 2009; Ryan *et al.*, 2009). A study by Coughlin (2015) confirmed that many students plagiarise everywhere, and regards plagiarism as "an unacceptable form of misbehaviour and a violation against other scholars. Mahabeer and Pirtheepal, (2019) add that plagiarism is a common ethical issue facing higher learning institutions. It is after taking into account this fact that this study was conducted to attempt to understand Mzumbe University undergraduates' understanding of what constitutes plagiarism and ways of avoiding it.

1.2 Research Objectives

The main objective of this study was to examine undergraduate Students' understanding of Plagiarism at Mzumbe University (MU)

In this regard, the study specifically sought to:

- (i) investigate undergraduate students' levels of awareness of what constitutes plagiarism;
- (ii) establish the prevalence of plagiarism among undergraduate students at MU;
- (iii) establish reasons that make undergraduate students committing plagiarism.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Starovoytova (2017) noted that plagiarism crimes are of different forms depending on the context, such as casual, unintentional, intentional, and self-plagiarisms. Chrysler-Fox and Thomas (2017) added that plagiarism may include even a work missing a quotation mark when it is cited or when one uses the entire work of another person without citing or acknowledging the sources. A study by Enago Academy (2018) identified the following categories of plagiarism: complete (the whole document is copied), source-based (the author uses incorrect sources), and direct plagiarism where the author escapes using quotation marks after copying words to words. Kumar, *et al.*, (2014) suggests that of all types of plagiarism, the most commonly practised are intention and unintentional plagiarism.

2.1 Plagiarism in Tanzanian Higher Learning Institutions

In Tanzania, plagiarism has started to be given great attention recently (Mbilinyi, & Msuya, 2018). The incidences of plagiarism are accelerated with the increased use of online resources where students copy and paste online resources pretending to be theirs (De- Jager & Brown, 2010). This makes students and pupils in lower levels lack understanding of what constitutes (Anney & Mosha, 2015). Tanzania Commission of Universities (TCU) noticed the prevailing academic dishonesty and call upon all universities to acquire plagiarism software (TCU, 2019). In its handbook of standards and guidelines sections, 4.21.4A and 4.24.4 require all universities in Tanzania to immediately start using plagiarism software.

Plagiarism is becoming a growing problem in the Tanzanian education sector which however is not taken as a serious academic crime and thus no penalties are instituted to the culprits (Anney & Mosha, 2015). Advancement in technology and the usage of internet resources are contributing factors to increased cases of plagiarism. Few institutions in Tanzania have started creating awareness on what exactly constitutes plagiarism. Institutions with formal plagiarism detecting software are the UDSM SUA and MU (Qorro, 2015).

2.2 Plagiarism and Copyright Law

Copyright laws are established to protect the right of the creator of the work or ideas such as the work of arts and writings. Plagiarism and copyright infringement are seen as interchangeably used terms (Nicholson 2010). Lobanov-Rostovsky (2009) pointed out that the word plagiarism itself as it is, is not a crime but when a person is found committing plagiarism can be accused of

copyright infringement. This is associated with the commercialization of words. It is perceived that plagiarism arose with the emergence of copyright laws (Sentleng and King, 2012). Koul, *et al.*, (2009) emphasized that the perception of text as a commodity by a person's ownership rights that was made up by the printing press has led to the rise of plagiarism simply because everyone uses his/her idea as an economic benefit.

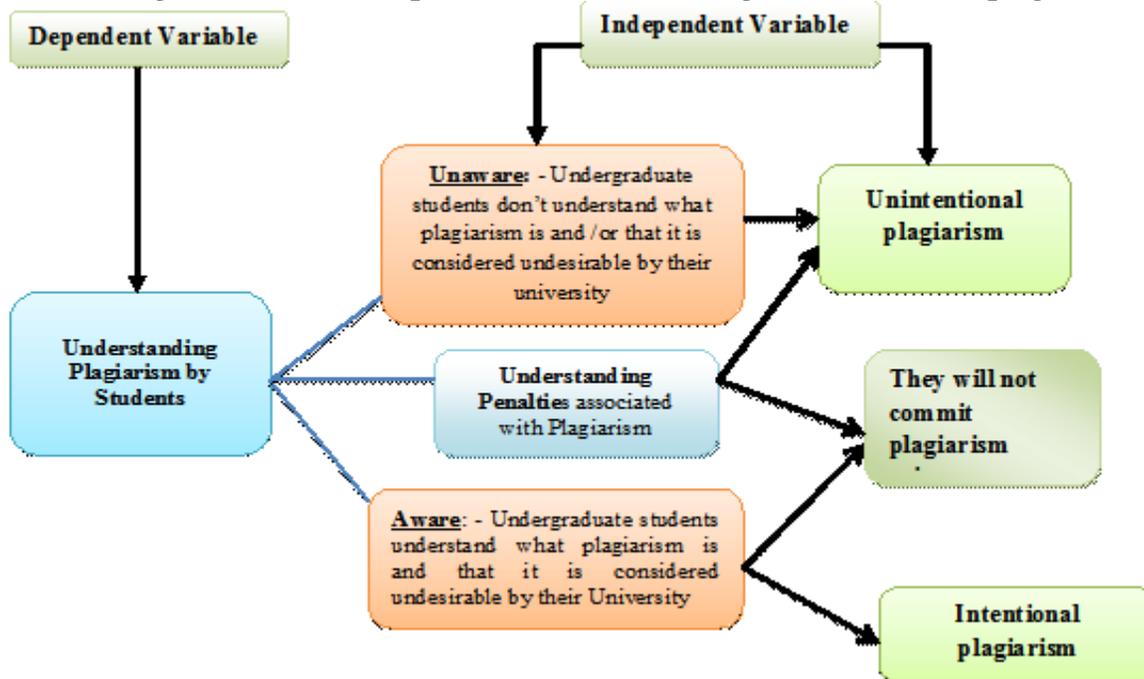
2.3 Root Causes of Plagiarism

Šprajc *et al.* (2017) were of the view that major causes of plagiarism are the pressure from family, lecturers, and university exam by-laws which require students to perform well. Roberts (2007) and Harris (2001) identified causes of plagiarism which include the perception that copying someone's paper is easier than writing original work, and students' poor time management. Wells (1993) identifies other causes of plagiarism that include lack of writing skills, and laziness among students. Bachore (2016) argued that difficult assignments, the irrelevance of course material, the pressure to gate good grades are also root causes of plagiarism.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by a conceptual framework developed by the researchers which proposes that unintentional plagiarism may be a result of the university's failure to teach students about referencing, or failure to highlight to the students that plagiarism was a crime and has penalties. It is assumed that students are not aware that plagiarism is a crime because they are not sensitised. If students are aware of plagiarism they will not commit plagiarism crime.

Figure 1: Relationship between understanding and intention to plagiarize



Source: Adapted from Powell (2010)

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study used a single case study design and employed a mixed-methods approach to collect data. The study population comprised 211 third-year students from the Department of Education at Mzumbe University. A sample size of 78 respondents was obtained using stratified and purposive sampling techniques. An interview, observation, questionnaire, and documentary review were employed in collecting data. Qualitative data were analyzed using the “content analysis method.” whereas quantitative data were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 20.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

4.1 Respondents Level of Knowledge on Plagiarism

Respondents were provided with items indicating where they have heard for the first time about plagiarism. Findings in Table 1 show that 57(79%) opted for university level, 13 (18%) ranked secondary level, whereas 2 (3%) heard it at the primary level. These results suggest that most of the students' understanding of what is plagiarism was at the university level. This is because at the university level is where plagiarism issues are taken into consideration.

Table 1: Respondents Source of Knowledge on Plagiarism

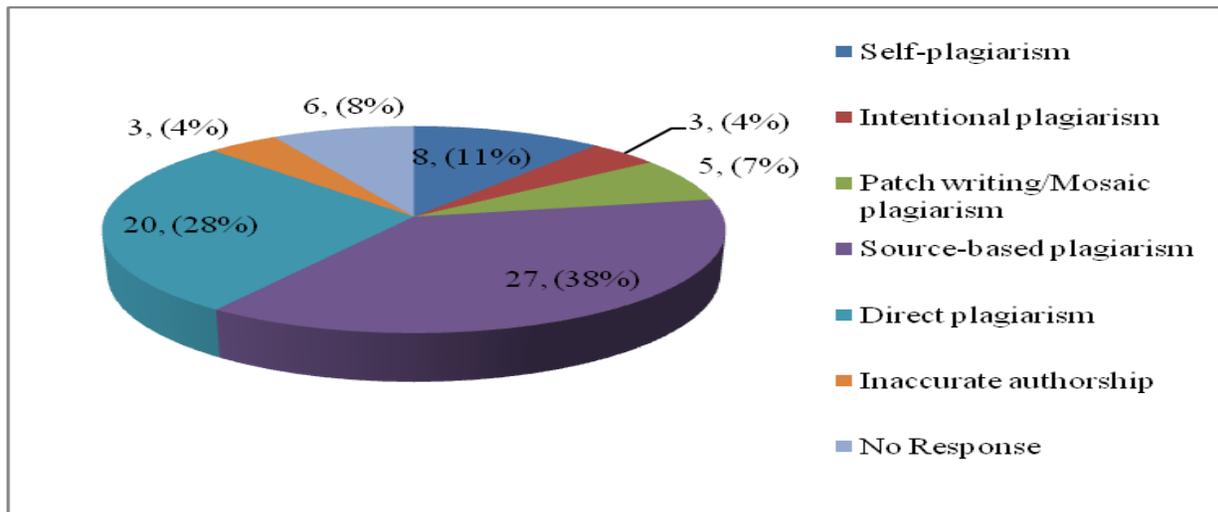
Category of Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Primary Level	2	3
Secondary Level	13	18
University Level (undergraduate level)	57	79
Total	72	100

Source: Field Data, 2019

4.2 Types of Plagiarism Known to the Respondents

Figure 2 shows that 27 (38%) know of source-based plagiarism crime. A total of 20 (28%) opted for direct plagiarism, 8 (11%) of the respondents were aware of self-plagiarism. A total of 6 (8%) did not respond to the questions, 5 (7%) were aware of patchwork or mosaic plagiarism, 3(4%) intentional plagiarism. A few respondents 3(4%) were aware of inaccurate authorship. The findings imply that the commonly known types of plagiarism were source-based plagiarism and direct plagiarism.

Figure 2: Types of Plagiarism Known to the Respondents



Source: Field Data, 2019

Source-based plagiarism is popular because of the omnipresence of internet resources which are easily copied without acknowledging the source.

In one of the interviews, one respondent commented that:

“...sometimes I find information online and use it in my assignment but I fail to get the clear source of that information so that I can cite or acknowledge properly. Since I don’t know about searching for the source, I end up deciding just to cheat by

using a different source so as I can satisfy my lecturers that I have cited the sources used in my work”.

The above findings are contrary to those of Kumar, *et al.*, (2014) in which intentional plagiarism was ranked as the most common type.

A total of 6 (8%) of the respondents did not respond to any of the responses provided. An investigation was done through the interview showed that they were not aware of the types of plagiarism crimes. Interestingly some of the respondents through open-ended questionnaire items mentioned the following types of plagiarism: indirect plagiarism, accidentally ended questionnaire items mentioned the following types of plagiarism: indirect plagiarism, knowledge plagiarism, internet plagiarism, and global plagiarism.

4.3 Incidences of Plagiarism at the University

Table 2 shows that many 28 (38.9%) students were of the view that plagiarism was common in the University and 16 (22.2%) thought that plagiarism was very common in the University as seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Plagiarism as Common Incidence at the University

Categories of Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Common	28	38.9
Very common	16	22.2
Not common	24	33.3
None of the above	3	4.2
No Response	1	1.4
Total	72	100

Source: Field Data, 2019

One of the respondents commented that:

“... Our lecturers do not have enough time to check if we have plagiarized. Students are always asked to submit a printed version of their works which are not easy for a lecturer to detect plagiarism”.

Another interviewee noted that:

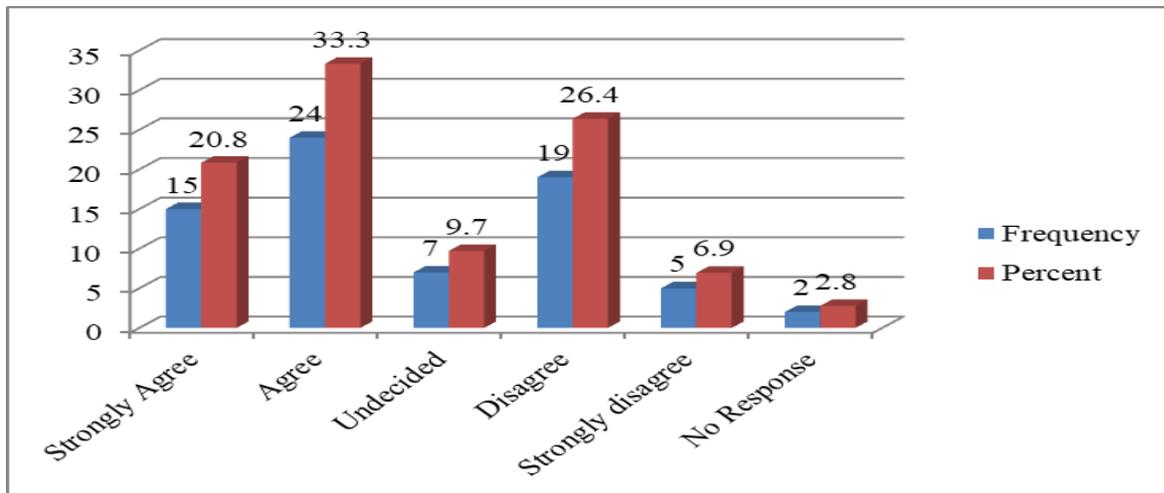
“...plagiarism at our University is very common, especially to undergraduate students as there is no policy which enforces it ”

This implies that the issue of plagiarism at MU is rife at the university and is a serious issue that needs to be tackled urgently.

4.4 Lack of Time as a Cause of Plagiarism

Findings which are summarized in Figure 5 below show that 24 (33.3%) and 15 (20.8%) of respondents agreed and strongly agreed respectively to the fact that lack of time is a major cause of plagiarism. However, 19 (26.4%) and 5(6.9%) disagreed, and strongly disagreed with the above proposition as shown below.

Figure 5: Time Shortage as a Cause of Plagiarism



Source: Field Data, 2019

An in-depth interview to supplement the above revealed the following:

“... it is true that most of us lack proper time management. Yet more, our timetables are very compacted to the extent that we cannot budget our time properly. Most of the time students are given a lot of assignments when the semester is approaching an end. The only choice here is to copy information online to fix their assignments. Students do not have a culture of managing time.”

These findings imply that a large number of respondents which is 39 (54.1%) agree that time shortage motivates students to commit plagiarism crimes.

4.5 Difficult Assignment as a Cause of Plagiarism

Difficult assignments have been cited to be a major cause of plagiarism. Results show that a total of 23(31.9%) strongly agreed, 18(25%) agreed, while 12(16.7%) strongly disagreed, and 11(15.3%) disagreed 7(9.7%) as shown in Table 5. Qualitative data from the interview revealed the following:

“...I completely agree that difficult assignment influences plagiarism crime, this is especially when we first attend the class and lecturers provide us with assignments, the only way to do the assignment is through copying from the other sources and present it to the lecturers”.

Table 5: Difficult Assignments as a Cause of Plagiarism

Category of response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	23	31.9
Agree	18	25
Undecided	7	9.7
Disagree	11	15.3
Strongly disagree	12	16.7
No response	1	1.4
Total	72	100

Source: Field Data, 2019

The findings above imply that difficult assignments push students to plagiarised other people’s works. These findings concur with those of Kayaoglu *et al.*, (2015) who submitted that difficult assignment given to students is one of the root cause of plagiarism.

4.6 Insufficient Penalties and Increased Rate of Plagiarism

Figure 7 below shows that insufficient penalties are not the major cause of plagiarism in the University as 18(25%) and 17(23.6%) respondents strongly disagreed and disagreed with the assertion that insufficient penalties encourage plagiarism.,

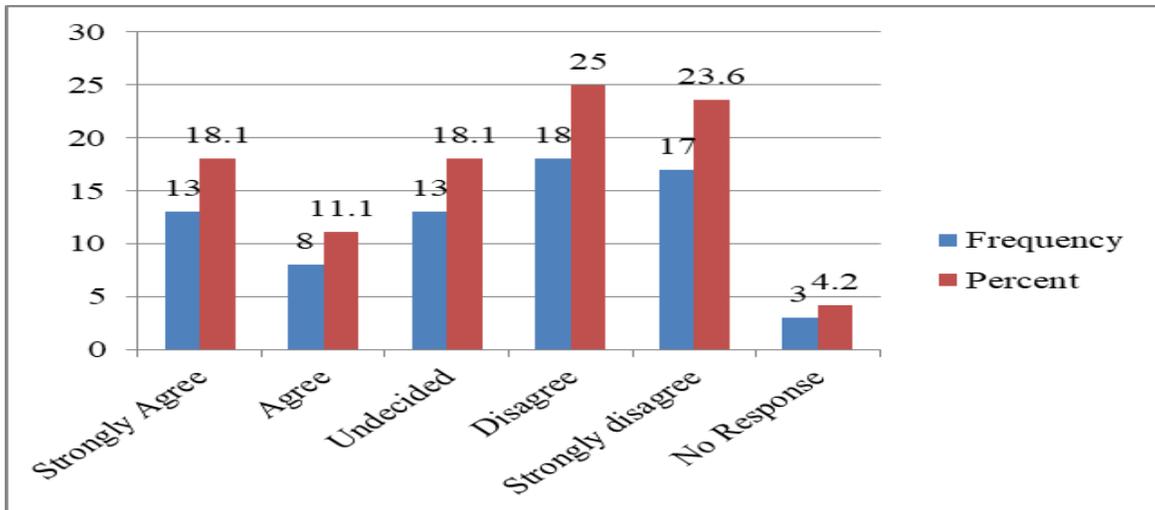


Figure 7: Insufficient Penalties and Increased Rate of Plagiarism

Source: Field Data, 2019

One of the respondents who was interviewed noted that:

“... very little attention is paid especially to the undergraduate students on issues related to committing plagiarism. The University has no written document or policy which stipulates penalties on a culprit of plagiarism, so one should not expect undergraduate students to beware of such penalties. Therefore, I can say that plagiarism is a common phenomenon which is

prevalent in our University because we have never seen anyone punished or warned for committing this academic crime.”

The findings indicate that a large number of respondents 25(48.6%) disagreed that insufficient penalties as causative of plagiarism. This is likely an indication that respondents are having little understanding of the penalties associated with committing plagiarism. This is contrary to the findings by Chrysler-Fox, & Thomas (2017), Abukari (2016) and Mahabeer, & Pirtheepal (2019) who recommended that plagiarism can be combated by imposing a heavy penalty on the culprits.

4.7 Lack of Awareness on the Penalties Associated with Plagiarism

Respondents were asked if they are aware of any penalty associated with plagiarism. Findings show that the majority 55(82.3%) were not aware of the penalties, 11(15.3%) were somewhat aware, 3(1.3) were slightly aware, 2(0.8) were moderately aware, while, 1(0.4%) were extremely aware. Conclusively, the findings revealed that many students were not aware of the penalties of plagiarism crime, therefore, they engage in plagiarism activities.

One of the respondents revealed that:

“...since I was in the first year I have never heard anything related to the punishment for the culprits who caught committing plagiarism”.

4.8 Laziness as a Cause of Plagiarism

The results in Table 6 show that 30 (41.7%) of respondents strongly agreed and 22(30.6%) agreed with the assertion that laziness is a major cause of plagiarism. However, 15 (20.8%) strongly disagreed and 3(4.2%) disagreed with the above assertion as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Laziness as the Cause of Plagiarism

Category of Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	30	41.7
Agree	22	30.6
Undecided	1	1.4
Disagree	3	4.2
Strongly disagree	15	20.8
No Response	1	1.4
Total	72	100

Source: Field Data, 2019

An in-depth interview was conducted and one of the respondents indicated that:

"... I can partly agree that most of us commit plagiarism because of laziness. This comes when we are given homework, and failed to work on them at a time when the deadline approaches the only remedy is to rush online and copy

someone's work. Additionally, we also commit plagiarism because we cannot manage our time properly."

This implies that many students commit plagiarism crimes because they are lazy. These findings are supported by Sentleng and King (2012) in South Africa, and Abukari (2016) in Ghana who strongly dictated that students' laziness is a root cause of plagiarism.

4.9 Analysis of Observations

Direct observation was carried out on the following variables: the Communication Skills for Teachers course outline (COM 104), Research Methodology in Education (EDU 205), and the third-year education Field Research Report. This was done to see if students had a topic on plagiarism and if they were adhering to ethics such as proper citation and acknowledging scholarly works.

Table 7: Data Collected Through Observation

S/n	Observed Variables	Findings on Observed Variables
1	Communication Skills for Teachers Course Outline (COM 104) of 2018/19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of the topics were English grammar. • No issues related to plagiarism
2	Research Methodology in Education course outline (EDU 205) for Education Programme 2018/19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The course outlined had only procedures for conducting scientific research. • No issues related to plagiarism or citation and or referencing styles.

Source: Field Data, 2019

Table 7 above shows that students are not imparted with skills and knowledge in the areas of plagiarism, ethical writing, referencing, and citation. This has also contributed to students at MU to be engaging in plagiarism activities.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Plagiarism is becoming a major problem at Mzumbe University in Tanzania. The majority of the respondents admit that plagiarism is rife at the University. The causes of plagiarism at Mzumbe University include laziness among students, difficult assignments given, and a general lack of knowledge on the penalties and consequences that go with plagiarism. Based on the findings of the study, and the real situation, the following recommendations were proposed:

- (i) Anti-plagiarism software should be introduced officially to undergraduate students.
- (ii) There is a need for the University to develop an anti-plagiarism policy.
- (iii) Topic on plagiarism should be added in the Communication Skills, and Research Methodology Courses at the university.
- (iv) There is a need to create awareness of plagiarism; and
- (v) Punitive measures for plagiarism culprits be categorically stated and enforced in the University.

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