

From First Degree to PhD: The Hidden Crisis of Research Outsourcing and Its Threat to Academic Integrity

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Abstract

Research is intended to transform students into independent thinkers, yet a growing number outsource their work to consultants or ghostwriting services. From undergraduate projects to doctoral dissertations, this trend undermines the integrity of higher education by replacing learning with transaction. This article explores the drivers, scope, and consequences of research outsourcing, drawing on evidence from Ghana and international contexts. Contributing factors include weak research capacity, inadequate supervision, time pressures, and the commercialisation of education. What begins at the undergraduate level often continues through postgraduate studies, producing graduates who hold credentials without acquiring the skills and maturity that research is meant to foster.

The consequences are severe. Individually, students lose opportunities to build competence in analysis, writing, and critical reflection. Institutionally, universities that award degrees for outsourced work risk losing credibility and eroding public trust. Societally, outsourcing weakens human capital by producing graduates unprepared to contribute effectively to innovation, policy, or professional practice.

The article calls for a multi-level response: students must embrace responsibility, supervisors should strengthen mentorship, institutions must provide support structures, and policymakers should enforce accountability. Restoring academic integrity requires reaffirming research as a process of learning rather than a commodity for purchase.

Keywords: *Research Hidden Crisis, Research Outsourcing, Academic Integrity, Artificial Intelligence in Learning, Academic Performance*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Research has always been regarded as the defining hallmark of higher education. It is the process through which students are expected to move beyond memorisation and reproduction of knowledge to become independent producers of ideas. At the undergraduate level, research projects expose students to the logic of inquiry and problem-solving. At the postgraduate level, research demands deeper engagement with methodology, theory, and evidence, while the doctoral dissertation represents the pinnacle of intellectual maturity, requiring originality and innovation. In each case, research is designed not merely as an academic exercise but as a transformative journey that prepares students for leadership in academia, industry, and policy.

Yet this noble vision is increasingly undermined by a disturbing development: the outsourcing of research by students. Across Ghana, Africa, and many parts of the world, students who are supposed to engage in research as a learning process are instead contracting others to do the work on their behalf. What was once considered a rare and shameful form of academic dishonesty has, over the past decade, evolved into a widespread practice, now supported by both informal networks and global industries that openly market dissertations, theses, and term papers for sale.

The motivations for outsourcing are complex and multifaceted. Some students struggle with limited research skills due to weaknesses in their prior education. Others juggle studies with full-time employment and family responsibilities, leaving them with little time for rigorous academic work. In many institutions, supervision is inadequate, with lecturers overwhelmed by large numbers of students, resulting in limited feedback and support. These factors combine to make outsourcing appear attractive, even rational, from the student's perspective. However, what may seem like a short-term solution carries long-term costs to both the individual and society.

Evidence suggests that outsourcing is no longer confined to isolated cases. Studies by Harper, Bretag, and Rundle (2019) reveal that contract cheating has become a multi-million-dollar industry globally, with websites openly advertising ghostwriting services. In Ghana, Osei-Tutu (2021) and Amponsah and Ofori (2023) report that many supervisors can now detect dissertations that bear little resemblance to the intellectual capacity of the students who submit them. Some students have been exposed during oral defences when they could not explain their own hypotheses, methodology, or findings. Similar experiences have been documented at universities in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, and even in advanced systems like the United Kingdom and Australia, where the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2020) has issued warnings about the growing threat of contract cheating to the integrity of higher education.

The scope of this problem is vast. It begins at the undergraduate level, where final-year projects are outsourced to consultants. By the time these students progress to master's and doctoral levels, outsourcing has become normalised. The result is a disturbing pipeline: from first degree to PhD, students bypass the developmental stages of research, graduating with certificates but lacking genuine competence. This pattern represents a silent erosion of academic standards, raising fundamental questions about the quality of graduates and the credibility of institutions.

The consequences of this outsourcing culture are profound. At the individual level, students who outsource research miss the opportunity to develop critical skills such as literature analysis, methodological reasoning, and academic writing. They may graduate with degrees, but they lack the intellectual maturity required in professional and academic contexts. At the institutional level, outsourcing erodes trust in universities. Employers and the public begin to doubt whether graduates can perform at the level their degrees suggest. At the societal level, outsourcing undermines national development, as higher education fails to produce the skilled human capital needed for innovation, governance, and problem-solving.

This article addresses the outsourcing crisis by situating it within the broader discourse on academic integrity and the gap between theory and practice in research. Specifically, it examines three interrelated dimensions: Firstly, the theme, which highlights how students increasingly outsource research instead of engaging in the learning process. Secondly, the scope, which spans from undergraduate to doctoral levels, shows that the problem is systemic rather than episodic. Lastly, the consequences reveal the decline in academic integrity and standards, with implications for individuals, institutions, and society at large.

By critically analysing these dimensions and drawing on both Ghanaian and global evidence from 2018 to 2025, the article contributes to ongoing debates on the quality of higher education. It further proposes a set of practical recommendations for students, supervisors, universities, and policymakers. Ultimately, the paper argues that safeguarding the credibility of higher education requires reasserting research as a process of intellectual growth rather than a commodity to be outsourced.

2.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

A sound understanding of research methods is central to academic inquiry, especially at the postgraduate level. Methodological competence reflects not only technical skill but also the philosophical maturity of the researcher. It is the foundation that ensures coherence between a research problem, the design chosen to address it, and the interpretation of findings. Without this foundation, students often become overwhelmed, which in many cases drives them to outsource their research to third parties or ghostwriters. This section examines the major research approaches and philosophies, integrating theoretical insights with recent empirical evidence to demonstrate how failure to engage deeply with these foundations erodes academic integrity.

2.1 Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches

Research methods are generally classified into quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2020). Starting with, Quantitative methods emphasise measurement, objectivity, and generalisation. They are closely associated with positivist assumptions, where reality is viewed as independent of the researcher and measurable through empirical observation (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). For example, a recent study in Ghana examined the relationship between mobile banking adoption and financial inclusion using regression models to generalise patterns across rural communities (Boateng, 2019). Then, Qualitative methods, by contrast, seek to capture meaning, lived experiences, and social context. They align with interpretivist traditions, emphasising that reality is socially constructed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). For instance, Mensah and Adjei (2021) used in-depth interviews to explore how cultural barriers shape the experiences of women entrepreneurs in Ghana.

Finally, Mixed methods combine the breadth of quantitative research with the depth of qualitative insights. This pragmatic strategy is increasingly used in doctoral research where complex issues demand multiple perspectives (Ivankova & Wingo, 2018). In African educational research, mixed methods have been used to study e-learning adoption, combining large-scale surveys with focus group interviews to capture both statistical trends and contextual experiences (Amponsah & Ofori, 2023). Empirical evidence shows that students who fail to grasp these distinctions often submit proposals with mismatched objectives, hypotheses, and methods. Osei-Tutu (2021), in a study of postgraduate students in Ghana, found that one of the most frequent weaknesses in proposals was the lack of alignment between research questions and methodological choice. This gap often pushes students to seek external help, sometimes leading to full outsourcing of their dissertations.

2.2 Research Philosophies

Beyond methods, research philosophies provide the worldview that guides methodological decisions. Four dominant paradigms are widely discussed: positivism, interpretivism, realism, and pragmatism. The first, Positivism, assumes that reality exists independently and can be objectively measured. Studies that rely heavily on surveys, experiments, or econometric models often reflect this stance (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For instance, quantitative assessments of inflation targeting on Ghana's economic growth rely on time-series analysis consistent with positivist logic (World Bank, 2020). Followed by, Interpretivism holds that reality is socially constructed and context-dependent. Researchers immerse themselves in participants' experiences to generate insights (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A Ghanaian study on cultural perceptions of success among youth illustrates this approach, relying on ethnographic observations and interviews (Mensah & Adjei, 2021).

Then, Realism accepts that while an objective reality exists, our understanding of it is filtered through social, cultural, and historical contexts. Realist research often uses both quantitative and qualitative tools to uncover deeper causal mechanisms (Bhaskar, 2020). For example, realist approaches have been applied in Sub-Saharan Africa to explore how cultural norms and institutional structures shape community health outcomes (Sarantakos, 2021). Finally, Pragmatism emphasises utility and flexibility, adopting whichever method best addresses the research problem (Saunders et al., 2019). Pragmatic studies in Ghana, such as those examining digital transformation in banks, blend econometric analysis with qualitative interviews to balance statistical breadth with managerial insights (Amponsah & Ofori, 2023).

Empirical link to outsourcing: When students fail to understand these philosophical traditions, they often insert them into dissertations mechanically. Harper, Bretag, and Rundle (2019) call this a symptom of *contract cheating*, where philosophical coherence is absent because students outsource critical sections of their work. In Ghana, Amponsah and Ofori (2023) similarly observed that weak engagement with research philosophy leaves students vulnerable to plagiarism and reliance on external experts.

2.3 Theories Linking Philosophy and Research Practice

Several theories have been developed to bridge philosophy and research practice, each offering frameworks for methodological decision-making: The Research Onion Model (Saunders et al., 2019) provides layers of decision-making from philosophy, approach, and strategy to time



horizon and data collection. It illustrates how coherent research requires sequential alignment. Students who skip this reflective process often struggle, leading to superficial work or outsourcing. The Theory of Academic Integrity (Sutherland-Smith, 2020) emphasises honesty, trust, and responsibility as values underpinning scholarly inquiry. Outsourcing violates this theory by replacing independent learning with commodified outputs. The Capability Approach (Sen, 1999; applied in education research by Alkire, 2018) frames education as the development of human capabilities. Outsourcing undermines this by depriving students of the capability to think, critique, and innovate. The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2017) explains that intrinsic motivation drives deep learning. Where students lack intrinsic motivation or are pressured by extrinsic demands such as deadlines, they may resort to outsourcing rather than authentically engaging with research.

2.4 Bridging Theory and Practice in the Context of Outsourcing

The central purpose of research philosophy is to ensure coherence between problem formulation, data collection, and interpretation. However, outsourcing disrupts this bridge. A doctoral student who employs a consultant may receive a dissertation framed within positivism, but when asked in a viva to explain why a positivist stance was appropriate, the student falters. This detachment highlights the dangers of outsourcing: the work may appear polished, but the student lacks intellectual ownership.

This phenomenon has been empirically noted in studies of contract cheating. Harper et al. (2019), in their global survey, found that students who outsource assignments typically perform poorly in oral defences, suggesting a lack of connection to the written work. In Ghana, Osei-Tutu (2021) reported similar trends where supervisors noticed inconsistencies between a student's written submissions and their verbal explanations.

2.5 Ghanaian and African Perspectives

In African universities, the outsourcing problem is compounded by structural issues such as large class sizes, limited supervision, and inadequate training in research methods. A recent study by Amponsah and Ofori (2023) emphasised that postgraduate students in Ghana often perceive research as a hurdle rather than a developmental journey, leading many to view outsourcing as a convenient escape. Similarly, Adom, Hussein, and Joe (2018) argue that the neglect of conceptual frameworks in African postgraduate work reflects a failure to bridge theory and practice.

Empirical evidence from Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya echoes this trend. Okebukola (2022) found that contract cheating services are thriving in Nigeria, with postgraduate students as key clients. In South Africa, research by Mthembu and Mokhele (2021) reported that outsourced dissertations often recycle generic templates that ignore local context, resulting in poor-quality scholarship.

2.6 Consequences of Weak Theoretical Foundations

The outsourcing crisis highlights the consequences of weak engagement with research theory. Students who neglect methodological foundations are unable to defend their choices, undermining both their credibility and the integrity of their institutions. Beyond academia, graduates who lack research competence enter the workforce without the critical skills required for policymaking, innovation, or professional leadership. As Sutherland-Smith (2020) warns, widespread outsourcing erodes public trust in higher education and diminishes the value of degrees.

3.0 BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE IN RESEARCH DESIGN

The design of research represents the critical juncture where theory is operationalised into practical steps. It is through research design that abstract philosophical assumptions are translated into workable strategies for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. In higher education, particularly at postgraduate levels, research design is the test of a student's ability to move from conceptual understanding to methodological execution. Unfortunately, many students fail at this stage, not because they lack intellectual capacity, but because they have not sufficiently engaged with the underlying processes. This shortfall often leads to dependence on

external experts or outright outsourcing of research work, thereby undermining both academic integrity and the spirit of independent scholarship.

Research design provides a roadmap that connects research questions, objectives, hypotheses, and data collection strategies. A well-conceived design ensures consistency and coherence across all stages of inquiry. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) argue, design is not simply about technical arrangements but about aligning the philosophical worldview of the researcher with the methods that best address the research problem. In Ghana and across Africa, however, studies show that students often develop designs that are either too broad, poorly aligned, or disconnected from their stated objectives (Osei-Tutu, 2021; Amponsah & Ofori, 2023). Such weaknesses create fertile ground for outsourcing, as students hand over the difficult task of structuring a design to hired writers.

3.1 From Topic Selection to Research Gaps

The first step in research design is the selection of a viable topic. A topic must be specific, original, and feasible in terms of time and resources. Yet many students propose overly broad themes, such as “leadership in Africa” or “education in Ghana,” which lack the focus necessary for rigorous inquiry. Narrowing down a theme to a precise problem, for example, “the effect of transformational leadership on employee performance in Ghanaian manufacturing firms”, requires critical engagement with literature and context. This process cannot be outsourced if the student is to gain mastery over their work.

The identification of research gaps is also central. As Adom, Hussein, and Joe (2018) stress, conceptual and theoretical gaps form the justification for new research. In Ghana, for example, while global studies have widely examined leadership and performance, there is a relative paucity of work focusing on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Sub-Saharan Africa. This constitutes a contextual gap that Ghanaian students can explore. However, many students fail to recognise such opportunities and instead depend on external experts to identify gaps on their behalf. The result is a superficial proposal that lacks originality and may recycle ideas already explored elsewhere.

3.2 Hypothesis Development as a Bridge

The formulation of hypotheses transforms theoretical reasoning into testable statements. Hypotheses provide the bridge between abstract concepts and empirical verification. For example, the theory that transformational leadership motivates employees can be translated into a hypothesis such as: “*Transformational leadership has a significant positive effect on employee productivity in Ghanaian manufacturing firms.*”

However, empirical evidence shows that students often struggle with hypothesis development. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2020) report that many postgraduate dissertations contain hypotheses that are either untestable, poorly aligned with objectives, or disconnected from the chosen methodology. In Ghana, Osei-Tutu (2021) found that postgraduate students frequently present hypotheses that bear no relation to their data collection strategy. Faced with this challenge, many students outsource this critical section of their work, relying on external writers to craft hypotheses without understanding their theoretical foundation. This disconnect becomes evident during oral defences, where students are unable to explain the rationale behind their hypotheses.

3.3 SMART Objectives and Structured Frameworks

Well-formulated research objectives guide the entire design process. The SMART principle, Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound, remains a gold standard for developing objectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). An example of a SMART objective might be: “*To evaluate the impact of ICT integration on mathematics performance among junior high school students in Kumasi between 2018 and 2022.*” Such clarity provides a sharper focus compared to vague statements like “to improve education in Ghana.”

The use of structured frameworks, such as conceptual or theoretical models, enables researchers to visualise the relationships between variables and move from abstract theory to testable constructs. For example, in research on mobile money adoption, variables such as trust, accessibility, and perceived ease of use may be linked in a conceptual model based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM).



Empirical studies emphasise the importance of structured frameworks. Amponsah and Ofori (2023) found that postgraduate students in Ghana who employed conceptual models produced more coherent and defensible dissertations. Yet, many students avoid this task, considering it too complex, and instead outsource it. As Harper, Bretag, and Rundle (2019) note, outsourced research often includes generic models that are poorly adapted to the student's context, weakening the originality and practical relevance of the study.

3.4 Ghanaian Illustrations of Bridging Design and Practice

Practical examples from Ghana reveal both the potential and the pitfalls of research design. Studies on mobile banking have successfully applied technology adoption theories to examine financial inclusion in rural areas (Boateng, 2019). Research on education reforms has drawn on learning theories to design interventions tested through classroom-based surveys. Similarly, investigations into corporate governance in Ghanaian banks have employed agency theory alongside financial data to assess firm performance.

These examples show how theory can be effectively operationalised in design. Yet, many dissertations reviewed in Ghanaian universities show inconsistencies such as mismatched variables, objectives that do not align with hypotheses, and analysis techniques that do not correspond with the data type. Supervisors frequently attribute these inconsistencies to outsourcing, where external writers impose generic templates on unique research contexts.

3.5 Avoiding Common Pitfalls

The most common pitfalls in research design include selecting topics that are too broad, failing to identify genuine gaps, misaligning hypotheses and objectives, and designing studies without considering feasibility. These pitfalls are well-documented in African higher education research (Amponsah & Ofori, 2023; Osei-Tutu, 2021). Outsourcing amplifies these weaknesses because students fail to gain the reflective skills required to identify and correct errors. Ultimately, bridging theory and practice in research design requires discipline, creativity, and critical engagement. When students bypass this process through outsourcing, they undermine their own intellectual development and compromise the standards of higher education. Supervisors and institutions therefore have a responsibility to mentor students through these challenges, ensuring that they develop the competence and confidence needed to own their research journey.

4.0 THE ROLE OF LITERATURE REVIEW AS A BRIDGE

The literature review is the intellectual backbone of any research work. It is the platform where the researcher situates their study within existing scholarship, demonstrates awareness of what has been done, and identifies the space where their work will contribute. Without a solid literature review, research lacks direction and originality. For students, especially those at the postgraduate level, the literature review provides the bridge between abstract theory and practical design. It connects philosophical foundations with methodological execution by showing how past studies have treated similar problems and where gaps remain.

Unfortunately, the literature review is also one of the sections most frequently outsourced by students. The reason is clear: developing a strong literature review requires critical reading, synthesis, and writing skills. Many students, overwhelmed by the volume of scholarly articles, resort to summaries of unrelated studies rather than a coherent synthesis. Others, pressed for time or lacking confidence, hand over the task entirely to external writers. The result is a review that may look polished but fails to build a convincing argument.

4.1 The Synthesis

A common weakness in student dissertations is the tendency to simply summarise previous studies without integrating them. Summary involves listing what each author has said, often creating a chain of disconnected statements. Synthesis, however, requires comparing, contrasting, and weaving together findings to reveal patterns, contradictions, and gaps. For instance, a student researching employee motivation in Ghanaian firms might summarise as follows: Mensah (2018) found that financial incentives improved productivity; Adjei and Boateng (2020) argued that recognition and work-life balance were equally important; and Ampofo (2021) showed that career development mattered most for younger employees. While these statements

are factually correct, they do not add value. A synthesised review would instead argue that, taken together, these studies suggest that although financial incentives remain crucial, non-financial factors such as recognition, work-life balance, and career development increasingly shape employee motivation in Ghanaian firms. This form of analysis not only summarises but also creates a new perspective.

A study by Osei-Tutu (2021) at the University of Ghana found that over 60 per cent of postgraduate proposals reviewed between 2018 and 2020 contained literature reviews that were descriptive rather than analytical. Supervisors interviewed in the same study revealed that students often relied on consultants to write this section, leading to generic reviews that lacked synthesis. Similar findings have been reported globally. Bretag (2019), in a multi-country study on contract cheating, observed that outsourced literature reviews often consisted of stitched summaries with little critical engagement, making them easy to detect during defences when students could not explain the arguments.

4.2 Identifying Gaps and Justifying Research

The true value of a literature review lies in its ability to identify research gaps. These gaps may be theoretical, methodological, contextual, or issue-based. Identifying them requires critical reading and reflection. In the Ghanaian context, several types of gaps are common. Many global studies may exist on leadership and organisational performance, but relatively few focus specifically on African SMEs, which creates a contextual gap. Most studies on financial inclusion rely on survey data, but very few apply experimental or longitudinal designs, which creates a methodological gap. Issues such as e-learning in rural universities or climate change adaptation at the community level remain underexplored, which constitutes an issue-based gap.

Amponsah and Ofori (2023) emphasise that Ghanaian postgraduate students often fail to identify such gaps, relying instead on recycled research topics. This failure, according to their findings, is partly due to outsourcing, as consultants typically insert gaps that sound convincing but lack originality or local relevance. In one notable case at a West African university, a doctoral student presented a proposal that claimed to address a “methodological gap” in leadership studies. Upon further questioning, it became evident that the student did not understand what a methodological gap was and could not explain how the chosen methods addressed it. Supervisors later discovered that the proposal had been drafted by a private consultant.

Globally, similar cases abound. In Australia, Harper et al. (2019) reported that contract cheating services routinely provide students with pre-written literature reviews that identify gaps in broad terms but fail to tailor them to the student’s context. In South Africa, Mthembu and Mokhele (2021) found that literature reviews in outsourced dissertations often replicated Western perspectives without engaging African realities, leading to research that was irrelevant to local challenges. These findings highlight that outsourcing prevents students from developing the critical skill of gap identification, which is essential for originality.

4.3 Literature Review as a Practical Tool

Beyond being a theoretical exercise, the literature review also has practical functions. It informs the development of conceptual frameworks, guides the design of instruments, and justifies methodological choices. For example, a Ghanaian student researching mobile money adoption may draw on prior studies that identify trust, accessibility, and perceived ease of use as key variables. These insights would then inform the design of survey questionnaires, ensuring that the research instruments are valid and grounded in established knowledge.

Research at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) illustrates this point. A recent postgraduate project on digital banking adoption in Ghana used the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) as a conceptual framework, drawing on both local and international literature to identify relevant variables (Boateng, 2019). By grounding their instruments in literature, the student not only strengthened the validity of their research but also demonstrated methodological maturity. However, many students who outsource their literature reviews end up with poorly constructed questionnaires because they fail to see the connection between literature and instrument design. Supervisors at KNUST have noted a rising trend of mismatches between literature reviews and methodologies, which they attribute partly to contract cheating.

4.4 Bridging Global and Local Scholarship



A high-quality literature review balances global and local scholarship. International studies provide broad theoretical frameworks, while local studies ensure contextual relevance. For instance, while European research on corporate governance emphasises board diversity, Ghanaian research reveals that regulatory enforcement often plays a more decisive role in firm performance (Amponsah & Ofori, 2023). A well-constructed review must therefore integrate both perspectives to show awareness of global debates while grounding the study in local realities.

Unfortunately, outsourced literature reviews often neglect this balance. Bretag (2019) observed that ghostwritten work tends to over-rely on international literature, neglecting local contexts. In Ghana, Osei-Tutu (2021) found that fewer than 30 per cent of dissertations reviewed between 2019 and 2021 adequately incorporated local literature. The implication is that outsourcing not only undermines originality but also disconnects research from the communities it is supposed to serve.

4.5 Common Pitfalls and Remedies

Several pitfalls frequently undermine the quality of literature reviews. Overreliance on outdated sources reduces relevance. Excessive dependence on secondary summaries rather than primary articles results in superficial analysis. Failure to move from description to synthesis leaves reviews without a clear narrative. These weaknesses are particularly common in outsourced work. Remedies exist. Students must be encouraged to prioritise recent, peer-reviewed sources, particularly those published between 2018 and 2025. Tools such as Google Scholar and Scopus should be used to access original works. Organising reviews thematically rather than chronologically helps to build coherent arguments. Most importantly, students must be trained to view the literature review not as a ritualistic requirement but as a strategic tool for building originality and contextual relevance.

Universities have a key role to play. The University of Cape Town, for example, has introduced mandatory academic writing workshops for postgraduate students, focusing heavily on literature review skills (UCT Annual Research Report, 2022). In Ghana, the University of Professional Studies, Accra (UPSA) has established a Postgraduate Writing Centre that provides coaching to students on synthesising literature rather than outsourcing it. These initiatives demonstrate that when institutions provide structured support, the temptation to outsource diminishes significantly.

The literature review is both a theoretical and practical bridge that connects abstract scholarship with methodological execution. When done well, it fosters originality, coherence, and contextual relevance. When outsourced, it produces superficial, generic, and ethically compromised work. Evidence from Ghana, South Africa, Australia, and other contexts confirms that outsourcing erodes students' ability to synthesise, identify gaps, and design valid instruments. The responsibility, therefore, lies not only with students but also with institutions to provide training, mentorship, and support systems that cultivate independent scholarship.

5.0 PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

Postgraduate research is intended to be both a training ground and a platform for knowledge production. At the Master's level, research enables students to apply theories to practice, while at the doctoral level, it demands originality and the creation of new knowledge. However, as noted in earlier sections, many students avoid these responsibilities by outsourcing their research. This section provides a step-by-step framework for how postgraduate students can practically engage with research, highlighting both best practices and the dangers of outsourcing.

5.1 Step One: Developing a Research Topic

The first and most crucial step in research is identifying a viable topic. A topic should reflect the student's personal interests, the needs of society, and gaps in existing scholarship. For example, instead of proposing a broad theme such as *education in Africa*, a more refined and manageable topic might be *the effect of ICT integration on mathematics performance among junior high school students in Kumasi between 2018 and 2022*. This narrower focus ensures feasibility and originality.

In Ghana, Osei-Tutu (2021) observed that many students submit topics that are either too broad or poorly justified. Supervisors reported that these topics were often suggested by

consultants rather than developed by the students themselves. Outsourcing at this early stage undermines ownership, because the student fails to develop the curiosity and passion that sustain research. Globally, Harper, Bretag, and Rundle (2019) confirm that outsourced topics are usually generic and recycled, lacking both contextual relevance and originality.

5.2 Step Two: Crafting a Strong Proposal

The proposal is the blueprint of a research project. It demonstrates not only what a student intends to study but also why the study matters and how it will be conducted. A good proposal includes a background, a clear problem statement, objectives and hypotheses, methodology, and significance. For example, a student studying digital banking adoption might frame their problem as *although digital banking is expanding in Ghana, rural adoption remains low, leaving many communities financially excluded*. This problem statement would then justify the research.

When students outsource proposals, they lose the opportunity to refine their thinking. Supervisors at the University of Ghana have reported cases where students submitted proposals with impressive language but were unable to defend their problem statements during oral review panels (University of Ghana Graduate Studies Report, 2022). At Stellenbosch University in South Africa, Mthembu and Mokhele (2021) found that outsourced proposals often contained problem statements copied from foreign contexts, which made them irrelevant to local realities.

The Ghana Journal of Higher Education (2023) warns that poorly crafted proposals are one of the leading causes of delayed graduations, as students are often sent back to revise work that they did not originally write. Thus, outsourcing may save time in the short term but results in long-term setbacks.

5.3 Step Three: Ensuring Methodological Alignment

One of the most common weaknesses in student research is the lack of alignment between research questions, objectives, methodology, and analysis. For example, a student may propose a quantitative hypothesis but then adopt a purely qualitative design, creating internal inconsistency. Methodological alignment means that the research question dictates the design, the design informs data collection, and the analysis directly answers the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Amponsah and Ofori (2023) found that fewer than half of postgraduate dissertations in a sample of Ghanaian universities demonstrated strong methodological alignment.

Many of the misaligned works were traced back to students who had relied heavily on consultants. In one documented case at a private university in Accra, a student submitted a dissertation with quantitative hypotheses but with interview-based data. When questioned, the student admitted that the methodology had been inserted by an external writer, leading to a mismatch that invalidated the study. Globally, Bretag (2019) and Sutherland-Smith (2020) highlight similar trends, noting that outsourced research often contains structural flaws that supervisors can easily detect. These flaws damage the credibility of both the student and the institution.

5.4 Step Four: Data Collection and Ethics

Data collection is the point where theory meets reality. Whether through surveys, interviews, experiments, or archival analysis, this stage requires students to engage directly with participants and contexts. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity, are non-negotiable. For instance, a study on rural banking practices in Ghana must consider literacy levels, language barriers, and community trust. A researcher who personally collects data will understand these dynamics and adjust accordingly. However, outsourced data collection often violates ethics. There are reports of students who submit survey results that were fabricated by consultants. In one notable case at a university in Kumasi, supervisors discovered identical responses across multiple questionnaires, raising suspicion of falsified data (Graduate School Research Ethics Report, 2021).

Internationally, similar scandals have been reported. In the United Kingdom, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) flagged cases where students submitted dissertations with data sets purchased online. Such practices not only undermine the validity of research but also constitute academic misconduct with severe penalties, including degree revocation (QAA, 2020).

5.5 Step Five: Analysis and Interpretation

Analysis requires linking findings back to research objectives and theoretical frameworks. Quantitative studies may use regression, ANOVA, or time-series models, while qualitative studies may employ thematic or content analysis. Regardless of the method, interpretation should explain not just what the results are but also why they matter. For example, if a hypothesis predicts that mobile banking improves financial inclusion, the analysis should go beyond reporting statistical significance to explain why adoption rates differ between urban and rural communities. Such insights demonstrate critical engagement.

However, many students who outsource analysis fail to understand their results. Supervisors at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology report that some students arrive at defences with polished statistical tables but cannot explain what a regression coefficient means. Similar findings were noted at the University of Nairobi, where students who outsourced dissertations could not explain the significance of p-values during viva voce examinations (Kenya Higher Education Council Report, 2022). Outsourced interpretations are often superficial, repeating textbook definitions rather than connecting findings to context. This weakness erodes the credibility of postgraduate research and raises questions about the competence of graduates.

5.6 Step Six: Writing and Dissemination

The final stage of research is writing and disseminating findings. Writing must be clear, logical, and persuasive, adhering to referencing standards and avoiding plagiarism. Dissemination should extend beyond submission to include journal publications, conference presentations, and policy dialogues. Students who outsource lose the opportunity to develop academic writing skills. At the University of Professional Studies, Accra, supervisors have noted that outsourced dissertations are often written in language styles inconsistent with the student's coursework, making them easy to detect (UPSA Postgraduate Assessment Report, 2023). Globally, Harper et al. (2019) warn that ghostwritten dissertations often contain referencing inconsistencies, which supervisors use to detect outsourcing.

More importantly, dissemination requires the researcher to defend their work publicly. Outsourced students, lacking ownership, often avoid publishing or presenting, thereby limiting the societal impact of their research. By contrast, students who personally engage in writing gain confidence and credibility, positioning themselves as contributors to both academic and policy debates.

5.7 Common Mistakes to Avoid

Several mistakes consistently undermine the quality of postgraduate research. These include choosing overly broad or trivial topics, treating the literature review as a summary rather than a synthesis, misaligning research questions with methodology, neglecting ethical considerations, and rushing through data analysis without proper interpretation. Empirical evidence suggests that outsourcing exacerbates these mistakes. Osei-Tutu (2021) found that dissertations written with heavy reliance on consultants in Ghana were more likely to be rejected or returned for major corrections. In South Africa, Mthembu and Mokhele (2021) documented similar findings, noting that outsourced dissertations often recycled outdated references, further undermining quality.

Remedies involve stronger mentorship, institutional training, and the cultivation of a culture of academic integrity. The University of Cape Town's mandatory research integrity workshops and UPSA's postgraduate writing centre are examples of institutional responses that have reduced outsourcing by empowering students to take ownership of their work. Postgraduate research is a process that requires sustained engagement at every stage, from topic selection to writing and dissemination. Each stage presents opportunities for learning and growth, but when outsourced, these opportunities are lost. Empirical evidence from Ghana and across the globe confirms that outsourcing results in poor-quality research, ethical breaches, and graduates who are ill-prepared for professional challenges. The practical guide presented in this section emphasises that genuine engagement with the research process is indispensable for maintaining academic integrity and safeguarding the credibility of higher education.

6.0 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOLARSHIP

Research is the cornerstone of higher education. It is the process through which students not only demonstrate mastery of subject matter but also cultivate the intellectual habits of inquiry, analysis, and critical reflection. At its best, research transforms students from passive receivers of knowledge into active producers of new insights. Yet, as this article has demonstrated, the growing practice of outsourcing research erodes the very foundation of this mission. The act of delegating dissertations, theses, and even final-year projects to consultants or ghostwriters represents a hidden crisis that is reshaping the culture of higher education in Ghana and across the globe.

6.1 Outsourcing Research Instead of Learning

The central theme of this article has been the replacement of learning with outsourcing. For many students, the rigour of research is perceived not as an opportunity for growth but as an obstacle to graduation. Instead of grappling with the frustrations of refining research questions, interpreting statistical outputs, or synthesising literature, students are turning to external providers to do the work for them. The result is a polished product that lacks intellectual ownership.

Evidence confirms that this is not an isolated phenomenon. Harper, Bretag, and Rundle (2019), in their international study of contract cheating, found that a growing number of students purchase entire assignments or dissertations from online platforms. In Ghana, Osei-Tutu (2021) documented similar trends, noting that supervisors regularly encounter proposals and theses that contain technical terms and methodologies far beyond the demonstrated capacity of the student. Amponsah and Ofori (2023) warn that this detachment from the research process undermines methodological competence and produces graduates who cannot defend their own work.

The tragedy of outsourcing is that it strips research of its formative power. Research is not meant to be easy. The late nights, repeated revisions, and moments of intellectual doubt are integral to the process of becoming a scholar. When students outsource these struggles, they also outsource the very lessons that higher education is designed to impart.

6.2 Scope of the Problem: From Undergraduate to Doctoral Levels

The scope of outsourcing is disturbingly wide. It begins at the undergraduate level, where students struggling with final-year projects often pay others to complete their work. What starts as a shortcut quickly becomes a habit. By the time these students reach postgraduate studies, outsourcing has become normalised. At the master's level, dissertations are contracted to consultants, and at the doctoral level, even entire theses are ghostwritten. Empirical reports highlight this worrying trend. At the University of Ghana, a 2022 review board noted cases where PhD candidates could not explain the statistical models in their dissertations, prompting questions about authorship (Graduate Studies Review Report, 2022).

At the University of Cape Coast, an academic audit in 2021 revealed that nearly one-third of master's students failed their first proposal defence because they could not justify their methodological choices, an indicator of heavy reliance on external writers. Globally, Sutherland-Smith (2020) found that in European universities, outsourcing was most prevalent at undergraduate levels but was increasingly being detected in PhD submissions, especially where students could not explain their research design during viva examinations. This scope matters because it demonstrates that outsourcing is not a one-off act of desperation but a systemic pattern that stretches across the entire academic pipeline. From a first degree to a PhD, outsourcing undermines the purpose of education by replacing learning with transaction.

6.3 Consequences: Decline in Academic Integrity and Standards

The consequences of outsourcing are severe, both for individuals and for institutions. At the individual level, students who outsource research graduate without the critical skills needed for professional competence. A master's graduate who cannot design a survey or analyse data is ill-equipped for roles that demand evidence-based decision-making. A doctoral graduate who cannot defend their methodology undermines the credibility of the title "Doctor of Philosophy." Such graduates may hold certificates, but they do not embody the intellectual maturity the certificates are meant to represent.



At the institutional level, outsourcing erodes academic integrity. Universities are trusted to certify competence. When degrees are awarded for outsourced work, this trust is betrayed. Employers lose faith in graduates, and the reputation of institutions suffers. In Ghana, several employers have expressed concern that recent graduates, even those with advanced degrees, often lack the analytical and problem-solving skills expected of them. This gap reflects the damage done by outsourcing. The decline in standards also has societal consequences. Higher education is a driver of national development. Countries like Ghana look to universities to produce the researchers, policymakers, and professionals who will address challenges in health, education, technology, and governance. When universities produce graduates who cannot conduct independent research, they fail to deliver on this mandate. As Amponsah and Ofori (2023) argue, outsourcing risks creating a generation of degree holders who are unable to contribute meaningfully to national development goals.

Internationally, governments and regulators have recognised these dangers. In the United Kingdom, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) introduced strict anti-contract cheating guidelines in 2020, warning that students found guilty of outsourcing risk having their degrees revoked. In Australia, universities have partnered with government agencies to shut down commercial ghostwriting websites, while Canada has introduced legislation making the provision of contract cheating services illegal (Bretag, 2019). These measures reflect the recognition that outsourcing is not just an academic concern but a threat to public trust in education.

6.4 Implications for Universities and Supervisors

For universities, the outsourcing crisis underscores the urgent need to strengthen support systems for students. Supervisors play a pivotal role in this process. When supervisors provide consistent mentorship and clear feedback, students are less likely to feel overwhelmed and resort to outsourcing. Conversely, when supervision is weak, students perceive outsourcing as the only option.

Institutions must therefore invest in writing centres, research skills workshops, and integrity training. For example, the University of Professional Studies, Accra, has established a Postgraduate Writing Centre where students receive guidance on structuring literature reviews and aligning methodologies. The University of Cape Town has introduced mandatory academic integrity workshops for all postgraduate students (UCT Annual Report, 2022). These initiatives show that when universities proactively support students, the incidence of outsourcing declines.

6.5 Implications for Policymakers

The outsourcing crisis also demands policy responses at the national and regional levels. In Ghana, the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) has the authority to enforce academic standards across universities. Stronger monitoring of dissertation defences, stricter enforcement of plagiarism detection, and mandatory training in research ethics could help address the problem. At a continental level, organisations such as the Association of African Universities (AAU) could play a role in developing frameworks for combating outsourcing and promoting integrity.

Policymakers must also recognise that outsourcing is fueled by the commercialisation of education. As higher education becomes increasingly market-driven, students view degrees as commodities to be acquired rather than journeys of learning. Addressing outsourcing, therefore, requires not only institutional reforms but also broader cultural shifts that reassert the intrinsic value of scholarship.

6.6 A Call to Restore Integrity

The hidden crisis of outsourcing poses a direct threat to the credibility of higher education. If left unchecked, universities risk producing a generation of graduates who are credentialed but incompetent, certified but unskilled. To prevent this, a collective effort is required. Students must embrace the struggle of research as part of their intellectual development. Supervisors must hold students accountable while providing the mentorship needed for success. Institutions must build systems of support, and policymakers must enforce accountability.

Ultimately, research is not about acquiring a certificate. It is about cultivating the independence of thought and analytical competence that society needs. The decline in academic



integrity and standards caused by outsourcing is not irreversible. With deliberate action, higher education can restore its credibility and reclaim its role as a driver of intellectual and national development.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The outsourcing of research by students represents a systemic threat to academic integrity and the credibility of higher education qualifications. To address this crisis, a multi-level approach is required, involving students, supervisors, institutions, and policymakers. The following recommendations provide a roadmap for restoring integrity and ensuring that research once again becomes a process of learning rather than a product of transaction.

7.1 Recommendations for Students

The first line of defence against outsourcing rests with students themselves. No matter how strong institutional systems may be, if students fail to embrace the responsibility of research, the crisis will persist.

7.1.1 Cultivating Research Mindset

Students must understand that research is not merely a requirement for graduation but a formative process that develops critical thinking, independence, and creativity. Developing this mindset requires consistent engagement with academic tasks from the undergraduate level. For example, undergraduate students at the University of Cape Coast who participated in research methods workshops reported greater confidence in handling their projects compared to peers who sought shortcuts (UCC Academic Audit, 2021).

7.1.2 Building Research Skills Early

Research skills should not be left until the final year. Students should begin learning how to conduct literature reviews, analyse data, and use reference management tools as early as their first degree. Evidence from a 2020 study at the University of Ghana showed that students who enrolled in voluntary research clinics in their second year were less likely to outsource final-year projects (Graduate Skills Development Report, 2020).

7.1.3 Seeking Mentorship and Peer Support

Students often outsource because they feel isolated. Building peer learning groups where students support one another in writing and analysis reduces the temptation to seek external writers. At UPSA, peer mentoring initiatives have been credited with reducing outsourcing by encouraging collaboration and accountability (UPSA Research Centre Report, 2023).

7.1.4 Embracing Academic Integrity

Finally, students must recognise that outsourcing is not a harmless shortcut but a violation of academic integrity. Sutherland-Smith (2020) emphasises that understanding integrity values honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility helps students resist the lure of contract cheating. Universities should encourage students to sign integrity pledges, as practised at institutions in the United States and recently adopted by the University of Cape Town (UCT Integrity Workshop Report, 2022).

7.2 Recommendations for Supervisors

Supervisors play a pivotal role in shaping students' research journeys. When supervision is strong, students feel guided and supported, and when it is weak, students turn to outsourcing.

7.2.1 Providing Active Mentorship

Supervisors must go beyond approving drafts to actively mentoring students in developing ideas. This includes guiding them in topic selection, showing them how to identify gaps, and explaining the rationale behind methodologies. A study at the University of Ghana (Osei-Tutu, 2021) found that students who received close mentorship were less likely to outsource, even when faced with challenges.

7.2.2 Regular Monitoring of Progress



Outsourcing thrives when supervisors only see the final product. Supervisors should require incremental submissions from topic outlines, literature summaries, draft chapters, and data analysis so that they can track progress. This approach was introduced at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, where incremental assessments significantly reduced cases of ghostwriting (Mthembu & Mokhele, 2021).

7.2.3 Testing Oral Defences Regularly

Supervisors should not wait until the final viva voce to assess whether a student owns their work. Periodic oral presentations, where students explain their methods and findings, allow supervisors to detect detachment early. For example, at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), mid-year oral defences were introduced in 2021 to ensure students could verbally defend their progress (KNUST Graduate School Report, 2021).

7.2.4 Modelling Integrity

Supervisors must themselves model academic integrity. If supervisors are perceived as indifferent or complicit, students will not take integrity seriously. Supervisors should emphasise transparency, provide feedback promptly, and resist any temptation to benefit from the commercialisation of academic writing services.

7.3 Recommendations for Universities and Institutions

Outsourcing is not only a student problem but also an institutional one. Universities must create environments that make it difficult, unnecessary, and unattractive for students to outsource.

7.3.1 Establishing Writing Centres

Writing centres provide structured support for students who struggle with academic writing. The University of Professional Studies, Accra, and the University of Cape Town both report success in reducing outsourcing after establishing writing centres (UPSA Graduate Research Review, 2023; UCT Annual Report, 2022). Such centres should offer one-on-one coaching, workshops, and resources on literature review, referencing, and academic writing.

7.3.2 Integrating Research Skills in Curriculum

Research skills must be integrated across programs, not left to final-year modules. Universities should embed courses on research methods, critical thinking, and academic writing from the first year. Evidence from the University of Nairobi shows that early integration reduced outsourcing by giving students confidence in their abilities (Kenya Higher Education Council Report, 2022).

7.3.3 Using Technology for Detection

Plagiarism detection tools like Turnitin are already widely used, but universities must also adopt tools designed to detect ghostwritten work. Emerging artificial intelligence-based tools can analyse writing style across multiple submissions to detect inconsistencies (Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021). Institutions should invest in such technologies and train faculty to use them effectively.

7.3.4 Enforcing Strict Consequences

Clear policies and strict enforcement are necessary. Students must know that outsourcing is a form of academic misconduct with serious consequences, including suspension or expulsion. In the United Kingdom, universities now revoke degrees when evidence of outsourcing is discovered, a model that Ghanaian institutions could adapt (QAA, 2020).

7.3.5 Encouraging Publication and Dissemination

Students who know they will be required to present or publish their research are more likely to take ownership of it. Institutions should encourage conference presentations and journal submissions. At UPSA, a policy requiring students to submit at least one paper to a peer-reviewed journal before graduation has strengthened ownership and reduced outsourcing (UPSA Research Centre Report, 2023).

7.4 Recommendations for Policymakers and Regulators

At the policy level, outsourcing must be addressed as a matter of public interest. If degrees lose credibility, the human capital base of nations is weakened.

7.4.1 Strengthening National Quality Assurance

In Ghana, the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) should enhance monitoring of academic integrity policies across universities. This includes requiring universities to report annually on plagiarism and outsourcing cases, as well as auditing viva voce processes.

7.4.2 Criminalising Contract Cheating Services

Countries such as Australia and Canada have already criminalised the provision of contract cheating services (Harper et al., 2019). Ghana and other African nations should consider similar legislation to deter the growing industry of ghostwriting. Enforcement must target not only online platforms but also informal networks that provide dissertations for payment.

7.4.3 Supporting Capacity Building

Governments should invest in postgraduate training programs that build research capacity. Scholarships should include research workshops, writing retreats, and mentorship opportunities. The African Union's Pan-African University program provides a model where structured research training reduces reliance on outsourcing (AU Higher Education Report, 2021).

7.4.4 Promoting Regional Collaboration

Because outsourcing often crosses borders, regional collaboration is vital. Bodies such as the Association of African Universities (AAU) and the African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) can play a role in developing regional policies, sharing best practices, and creating databases to detect and track contract cheating services.

7.5 Summary of Recommendations

The crisis of outsourcing is not insurmountable. Students must embrace responsibility, supervisors must provide mentorship, universities must build support systems, and policymakers must enforce accountability. If all stakeholders play their part, the culture of outsourcing can be replaced with a culture of integrity. Research will once again become a journey of learning rather than a product of transaction, and higher education will reclaim its credibility as a driver of national and global development.

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