

Factors Contributing to Information Ethics Violations among LIS Students in Public Universities in Kenya

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Abstract: *Academic honesty and respect for intellectual property has been given considerable concern in tertiary institutions but concerns of information ethics have increased in the recent years evidenced by rising plagiarism, increased hacking, privacy violation and matters relating to the digital divide. Drawing from the Social cognitive theory, this study sought to establish presence of information ethics violations, prevalence and contributing factors among Library and Information Sciences (LIS) students in public universities in Kenya. Respondents comprised of students, lecturers and heads of department drawn from four public Universities in Kenya. The study established from respondents that IE violations incidences existed in LIS schools. This was manifested in the form of plagiarism, acts of hacking, breach of confidentiality and piracy; with plagiarism as the most prevalent among LIS students. A number of factors contributed to information ethics violations by LIS students with reluctance in conducting research, inadequate research skills and limited knowledge on how to conduct research as major contributors. Other factors included laxity among lecturers to detect and curb the vice, competing interests on the student's time and attention, lack of clarity in regulations on matters relating to IE, peer influence and poor time management. Students also considered the availability of commercial research assistance around the university and downloading papers online as a major contributing factor. The study found that punishment has been used as a deterrent measure for information ethics violations in LIS schools, but its effectiveness in mitigating the vices has been challenged, hence suggests the inclusion of information ethics education in LIS training as a measure for behaviour change in mitigating the violations.*

Keywords: information ethics violations, ethics education

1. Introduction

Academic honesty and respect for intellectual property has been given considerable concern in tertiary institutions worldwide (Weedon 2000). However, ethical dilemmas confronting information users in the information society are rapidly exploding locally and globally (Introna 2002). Particularly, there is rising evidence of cases of academic malpractices, especially plagiarism, in universities and it continues to be an everyday worry for universities, information creators and vendors in Kenya (Daily Nation 2011; Amunga 2013). Besides, ethical resources available to the ordinary person are rapidly becoming fragmented, distributed and ambiguous (Introna 2002). This has resulted in the increasing importance of information ethics education in university curricula in Africa. Dadzie (2011) posits that the influence of ICT usage on moral values and the unequal access to and use of ICT has provided the rationale for integrating information ethics in LIS curriculum. Studies indicate that the necessity of information ethics training has arisen from the urgency of issues in the global information justice and plagiarism concerns, increased hacking, privacy violation and lack of training in information ethics for teachers and students (Smith 2002; Bell 2002).

2. Methodology

The study draws from the Social cognitive theory by Albert Bandura (Groves 2008; Lahey 2004) and aims to establish presence and prevalent information ethics violations, contributing and mitigating factors among Library and Information Sciences (LIS) students in public universities in Kenya. The research questions were; a) Are information ethics violations present in LIS schools in Kenya? If so, which violations are prevalent? b) What factors motivate LIS students to engage in information ethics violations? c) Which mitigation measures have universities put in place to

check on these vices. The study employed survey design of LIS departments in four public universities namely Moi University, Kenyatta University, Kisii University and the Technical University of Kenya. The sample constituted of six (6) Heads of department (HODs) and twenty four (24) lecturers who were purposively sampled, and two hundred and two (252) LIS students identified through stratified random sampling. A mixed method approached was used with an interview schedule for the HODs and two sets of questionnaires for lecturers and students.

3. Presence and prevalent Information Ethics Violations

The findings indicated that LIS students engaged in information ethics violations. The study found manifestations of information ethics violations in the form of plagiarism, acts of hacking, breach of confidentiality and piracy in LIS schools. The findings showed that 78.6% of students were aware of the existence of information ethics violations, with 60.3% indicating that they had observed information ethics violations. HODs and lecturers affirmed that they had handled information ethics violations cases relating to plagiarism, hacking, and piracy in LIS schools. They cited cases involving students hacking examination through the Local Area Network (LAN) in their university, buying readymade assignments from computer bureaus around the university and impersonation whereby students wrote and submitted assignments on behalf other students. HODs stated that cases of spam in e-mail, mobile money transfer (Mpesa) fraud and software piracy had been reported in universities.

It was established from lecturers (80%) and students (75.4%) that plagiarism was the most prevalent information ethics violations among LIS students. Other violations reported by students were piracy (63.5%), hacking (41.3%) and breach of confidentiality (41.3%). Lecturers were of the

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same opinion that breach of confidentiality (53.3%) and hacking (46.7%) were less prevalent. The study established from HODs that cases of plagiarism in undergraduate final year projects and assignments were becoming common in LIS departments. Research established that plagiarism was similarly widespread among LIS students in Uganda especially in assignments and projects (Kaddu 2007). Studies indicate that plagiarism has become more common and widespread, even among LIS students, being fueled by increased student access to digital information resources that can easily be copied (Laudon and Laudon 2012; Park 2003). Automated environments are unfamiliar worlds and individual actions may be confronted with situations not covered by societal rules of behavior or legal systems (Laudon and Laudon 2012; Martin. et al 2005). Arguments have been made that people's old intuitive habits of evaluation, which are adequate for determining what is best in traditional worlds, are inadequate in new and different settings (Laudon and Laudon 2012, Martin. et al. 2005; Severson 1995).

understood. Several factors were attributed information ethics violations, some which relate to poor research support systems by universities while others were within the control of individual students. HODs pointed out that lack of clarity in regulations to guide on matters relating to information ethics and inadequate policies present a challenge in dealing with and curbing the vices. Particularly, rules and regulations are not clear about what amounts to plagiarism and other information ethics violations in universities and do no advice faculty on the measures to take in case of violations. More so, mechanisms to reinforce adherence to these regulations are inadequate, therefore it is left to the discretion of departmental administrators at the university to decide on the measures to take when faced with such challenges. HODS were concerned that the attention given to research in undergraduate programmes is inadequate and considered inadequate research skills, competing interests and laxity among lecturers to detect and curb the vice as other contributing factors. Lecturers enumerated several contributing factors presented in figure 1.

4. Contributing Factors

Wenzel (2004) argues that the underlying factors about why people commit information ethics violations are not

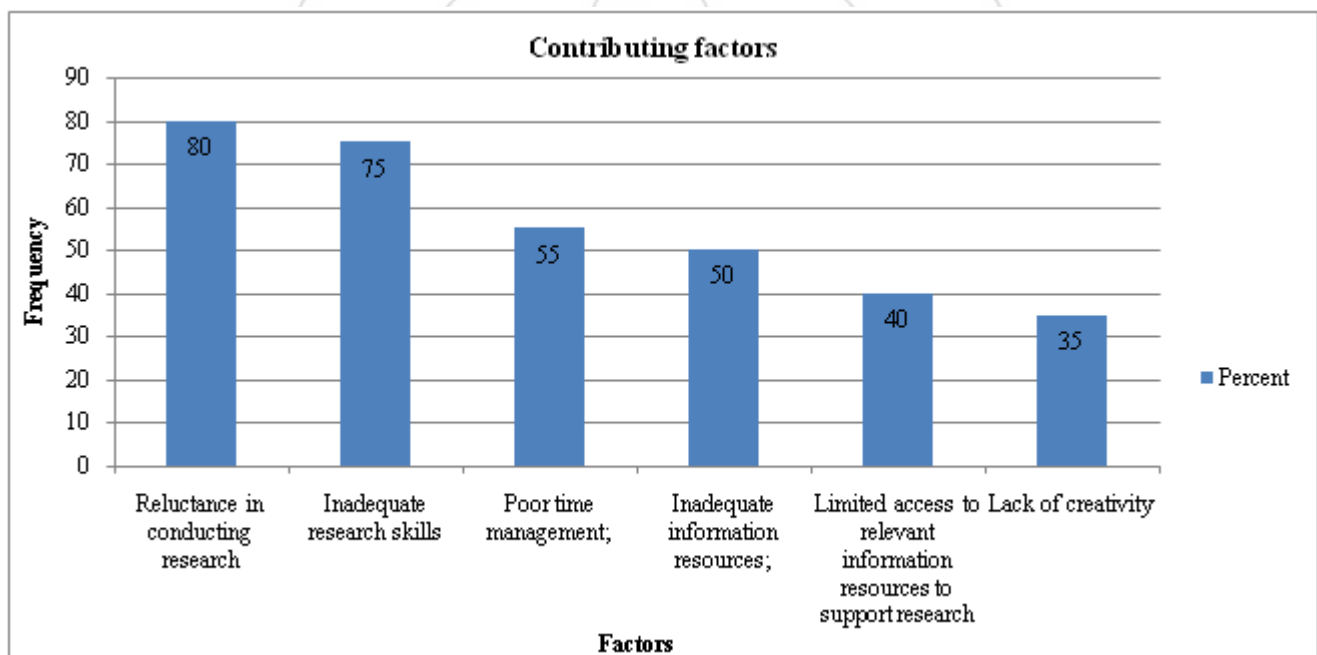


Figure 4.1: Lecturers Perception on contributing Factors towards IE Violations N=20

Reluctance in conducting rigorous research (80%) and inadequate research skills (75%) were given prominence by lecturers. They also pointed out poor time management (55%) and inadequate information resources (50%) as key contributors. Similarly, students indicated that they were motivated to engage in information ethics violations by limited access to relevant information resources to support research, academic and societal pressure, influence by other students and limited knowledge and time to do serious research. There seems to be so much pressure on students by society to perform and succeed, which is pushing students to unethical behaviour. Students pointed out that they are motivated when they see other students get away with it without being detected. Culwin and Lancaster (2011) assert

that not punishing those caught cheating can trigger fellow students, who are aware of such cases, to also engage in the practice or simply stop putting much effort into their own work.

Notably, students considered the availability of commercial research assistance bureaus around the university and commercial online papers referred to as term paper mills (Maxymuk 2006) as a major contributing factor. The availability of cheap commercial papers and computer bureaus where students could get research assistance at a very small fee discouraged student from doing rigorous research. The research assistance and lack of creativity portrayed in the study may be an indication that students

have been accustomed to be assisted in their academic endeavours and may not be confident to undertake serious research on their own. Studies have established that copying by students could be associated with lack of confidence in producing an individual work, lack of skills to produce a good piece of work and peer pressure where students believe that everyone is doing it (Kaddu 2007; Amunga (2013). Contrary, adventure was cited as one of the reasons, so students should be guided on what do when they accidentally land in such terrain.

5. Deterrent Measures

Meng-Hsian and Feng-Yang (2003) acknowledge that transgressive conduct is regulated by both social sanctions and internalized self sanctions. Consequently, several strategies and policies have been put in place in universities in Kenya in terms of research ethics, institutional core values, social responsibility and punishment as means to dissuade LIS students from breaching information ethics measures. The study found that universities have severed punishment as means to deter information ethics violations. To reinforce adherence, some universities have drafted plagiarism policies and even introduced plagiarism checkers as deterrents to plagiarism. Consequently, this has assisted to instill adherence to and responsibility in research ethics, although its effectiveness in dissuading students from violations has been challenged. It has been observed that students have devised innovative ways to go around plagiarism detectors (Patel, Bhakhtiyari and Taghvani 2011). In addition, Savage (2004) and Britz (2014) raise concerns about the legal issues concerning privacy, copyright, ownership of labour and academic freedom. This was evident in the study findings that despite the introduction of plagiarism checkers by some universities and evidence that in certain circumstances, some students were aware of the rules governing information ethics violations; this did not deter students from engaging in malpractice. Britz (2014) suggests that students should be educated on plagiarism, plagiarism policy and the process used in the university to mitigate plagiarism which this study supports.

This study suggests ethics training through integration of information ethics courses in LIS curriculum so as to raise the level of information ethics awareness, and check emerging information ethics violations. The social cognitive theory posits that behavior is modeled and LIS training should model behavior associated with the profession. Drawing from this theory, LIS students should be able to appreciate and identify with behaviour that is reinforced as well as shun from behaviour that is punished. Studies on mitigation of information ethics violations in universities (Amunga 2013; Dadzie 2011; Smith 2014/2002; Limo 2010), have reinforced the rationale for teaching information ethics to LIS students for the reason that it would cultivate ethical values among students early in their academic career. Limo (2010) asserts that exposing students to such a course would prohibit mischief like hacking and other internet crimes.

Limo (2010) argues that as Kenya develops into an information society, LIS students and professionals should know the rules and regulations governing the information

superhighway. Information professionals have so much power in the information era; therefore raising the level of information ethics awareness through integrating information ethics courses in LIS curriculum could prohibit mischief like hacking and other internet crimes (Limo 2010; Bell 2002; Smith 2002). Kaimenyi (2014) urged Kenyan universities to introduce programmes on ethics so as to nurture students to be sincere and honest and be people of high integrity. Similarly, the study advocates that LIS schools in public university in the country should integrate information ethics courses in their curriculum to prepare students to be ethically equipped for the information profession. This would foster future LIS professionals with the culture of responsibility and help bridge the legal gap in the information society.

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