

Ethos of Librarians in Academic Libraries in Uganda: A Study of Unethical Practices

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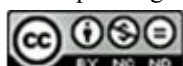
Abstract

This paper analyses the ethical practices of Ugandan academic librarians by studying student service experiences at Kyambogo University (KyU) and Uganda Christian University (UCU). Through focus group discussions conducted with twenty-three (23) Library and Information Science (LIS) students (n=14 Kyambogo; n=9 UCU) who served as participants sampled by convenience and purposive strategies, the study analysed the multifaceted aspects related to ethical conduct. The research revealed that students' perceived expectations of research assistance, ICT, and reference services differed substantially from actual practice. Current unethical conduct includes librarian absence and book restrictions, as well as resource misuse. This ethical deficit arises from three main factors: insufficient and enforceable ethical standards at the national level, inadequate professional oversight systems, and cultural norms within UCU, which exemplify faith-based higher education that sometimes conceals underlying ethical difficulties. This research develops an Ubuntu-based ethical system to supplement the IFLA Code of Ethics tailored to the Ugandan sociocultural setting. The study promotes LIS education that focuses on ethics, along with continuous professional development initiatives, and the development of a code of conduct between libraries and the delivery of psychosocial services to librarians. The study brings sophistication to African library ethics scholarship by supplying ethical recommendations tailored for academic institutions based upon empirical findings.

Keywords: Ethos, Academic Libraries, Librarians, Ethical behaviour

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Introduction

Ethics is often used in connection with the activities of organisations and with a professional code formalised in terms of exhaustive sets of rules or guidelines stating how employees are expected to behave in their workplaces (Mungial, 2019). Ethical practice in information service provision encompasses various perspectives, including the choice of material (selection), access, equality of treatment, copyright, intellectual freedom, protection of users' rights, and confidentiality. In a negative sense, it includes concealing information, misinforming clients, and divulging private information (Adebayo & Mabawonku, 2017). The practice of information ethics is better understood with a focus on the principles of information service delivery, which involves professionals who know how to behave towards users in their libraries (Nambobi et al., 2023). Librarians play a key role in teaching, learning, and research by facilitating users' access to information resources; therefore, understanding the ethos of librarians in academic libraries is crucial for ensuring that library users are protected from unethical behaviour by librarians. In Uganda, the ethos of librarians is shaped by the availability of policies that govern universities and library services.

Moreover, the Uganda Library and Information Professional Association has yet to promulgate an ethical code to guide library and information professionals as intermediaries between the information services they provide and their clients (Nambobi et al., 2023). Besides, it is presumed that academic librarians in Uganda could still be exhibiting unethical behaviour, such as discrimination, inequality in information access, and negligence of duty. Therefore, the study investigated the unethical practices of librarians in academic libraries in Uganda by examining their work practices and procedures. Therefore, this study aimed to identify and address unethical practices among librarians at Kyambogo and Uganda Christian University libraries. The study proposed a framework that academic libraries in Uganda could adopt to inform their approach to addressing unethical practices among librarians.

Problem Statement

Academic libraries across Uganda play a crucial role as functional facilities that facilitate research, educational activities, and learning. The effective delivery of information services is facing growing challenges due to the increasing demand for high-quality and equitable services. Previous studies have focused on librarian ethical code awareness and perceptions of professional conduct (Nambobi et al., 2023); however, most have not sufficiently studied actual unethical practice behaviour in library daily operations. As of 2022, the library and information science profession in Uganda lacks proper ethical regulation, and practitioners are instead exposed to institutional-based and resource-related vulnerabilities.

This research aims to fill the knowledge gap by evaluating how library and information science (LIS) students perceive unethical behaviours, including absenteeism, alongside censorship, favouritism, and negligence. Grounded in institutional anomie theory (Messner & Rosenfeld, 2019) and complemented by Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), the study analyses ethical breakdowns through discrepancies between professional standards and institutional situations, such as CPD fragmentation, together with poorly defined ethical rules and consistent funding shortages. Research findings on these issues in other Global South settings (Owusu-Ansah & Dadzie, 2023) demonstrate their broader impact and validate the need for local Ugandan studies.

Research questions

To guide this investigation, the study posed the following research questions:

- a. What types of library services are sought by students at Kyambogo University (public) and Uganda Christian University (faith-based), and how do these reflect institutional missions and resourcing?
- b. What forms of unethical conduct do students observe among librarians, and how are these behaviours rationalised within local organisational cultures?

Literature Review

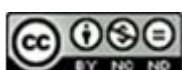
Academic library services and student engagement

Academic libraries continue to be vital for the accomplishment of global South higher education institutions by providing their students with information resources, alongside technological resources and academic guidance. Digital tools, along with online platforms, now require academic services to adapt dynamic, user-centred service models (Saikia et al., 2020). Physical libraries maintain their worth as vital facilities, even though not all users can rely on digital access equally.

Arthur and Brafi (2013) reported that Ghanaian university students visited libraries primarily for examinations and their assignments because supportive staff members, along with the educational environment, made these facilities convenient for them. The library users at the University of Allahabad and Aligarh Muslim University who participated in Singh and Bakhar's (2024) study stated that their primary reason for visiting was for study purposes, followed by borrowing resources and using ICT. Mayende *et al.* (2021) call for academic libraries to develop services that serve users through flexible spaces, as well as proper equipment and collections, alongside dedicated staff assistance.

Several research studies have been conducted within Uganda's academic libraries. According to Acanit *et al.* (2024), Ugandan university students heavily rely on library-printed resources because they lack technology skills and struggle to connect with electronic sources outside the library. The service delivery quality relies heavily on the professionalism and behaviour of library staff, while resource constraints specifically affect public institutions, according to Nambobi et al. (2023). From this theoretical perspective, librarians prove themselves to be navigators of institutional anomie, extending their traditional role as service providers. The professional conduct displayed by librarians is observable within restricted fields and represents "regulated improvisations," according to Bourdieu (1986).

The current study, therefore, demonstrates that librarians play a crucial role in shaping student education during their time in academic institutions. Moreover, it builds upon existing scholarship by analysing which educational services LIS students assess as most essential, as well as assessing how service quality affects students' beliefs about librarians' professional conduct and moral choices.



Ethical challenges and professional ethos in academic libraries

The mission of academic libraries to serve their users through equal access to information faces growing challenges from diminishing professional ethical standards in service delivery. Ferguson *et al.* (2016) explain how ethical misconduct occurs gradually through discriminatory actions, institutional abuse of power, and neglectful conduct toward internal users. The paper by Afolayan (2022) outlines numerous ethical problems that LIS practitioners experience, including both victims of confidentiality breaches and impediments to purposeful access. Ethical matters transcend mere operational issues because they stem from behind institutional cultural standards. According to Owusu-Ansah and Dadzie (2023), institutional cultures that fail to receive proper funding may sanction unethical behaviours, including employee absenteeism, favouritism, and improper exercise of authority among Ghanaian librarians. The absence of strong regulations and insufficient accountability by professionals allows these unethical practices to persist.

Research revealing unethical conduct in Uganda's professional sector remains scarce in academic publications. The examination of librarians' ethical awareness by Nambobi *et al.* (2023) *reveals both successes and failures* in explaining actual unethical practice experiences through librarian-user interactions. Kaddu and Ssekitto (2023) in their study on ethical practices in information service provision in academic libraries in Uganda confirm issues with poor customer service and staff attendance, alongside professional code violations and other problems. However, researchers have not conducted systematic investigations into these phenomena.

This study, therefore, examines unethical practices from the perspective of students in LIS who hold both user and professional roles in the future. The research grounds itself in institutional anomie theory (Messner & Rosenfeld, 2019) to analyse ethical norm interpretation and negotiation, as well as suppression, in academic libraries facing resource limitations and accountability uncertainty. The investigation adds new perspectives to ongoing discussions about African library ethics by examining how users experience unethical behaviour during their interactions with staff.

Methodology

A phenomenological qualitative study, grounded in the hermeneutic paradigm, analysed how Ugandan Library and Information Science students perceived the professional ethos of university librarians. Researchers designed the study to evaluate ethical actions in academic libraries by assessing institutional cultural practices and service arrangements. The study employed a dual sampling approach, incorporating purposive sampling procedures to select participants, particularly those with library ethics training and service experience, and convenience sampling to address accessibility limitations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions in universities. The researcher recruited a total of 23 LIS students to participate in the study, with 14 students attending Kyambogo University (KyU) and the remaining 9 attending Uganda Christian University (UCU).

The data collection process took place in 2022, involving six focus group discussions, each comprising three sessions at each institution, with four to five participants per session. Students participated in semi-structured protocols that centred on inquiries about how they observed librarian conduct and service experiences, along with their interpretation of professional ethics standards.

The research data then underwent three stages of analysis within ATLAS.ti 23 beginning with (i) descriptive coding of repeating themes, which included absenteeism and favouritism, and progressing into (ii) critical discourse analysis of professional conduct dynamics, followed by (iii) institutional mapping of the relationship between behaviours, policy enforcement, and organisational culture.

The study employed peer debriefing, along with member checking, which involved 30% of participants, as tools for maintaining research rigour. The dual position of LIS students as both library users and future professionals with knowledge of an ethical code qualified them to serve as study informants who specifically assessed librarian behaviour. This methodological approach delivered an in-depth analysis that placed the results in a specific relation to Uganda's university environment, while contributing to an understanding of ethical practices in African libraries.

Findings and Discussion

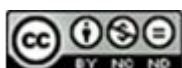
Services sought by students at Kyambogo and Uganda Christian University Libraries

Research by the authors revealed that the Kyambogo and Uganda Christian University libraries provide LIS students with a range of library services. Students at both institutions have access to research support in conjunction with ICT services, as well as reference and information services, reading space facilities, circulation services, user education, e-resource access, current awareness services, and Document Delivery Services (DDS). For example, Informant S2 from UCU said: *"I usually come to the library to access ICT services, especially online resources, which I cannot access when off campus. Some e-resources have restricted access, so it is difficult to access them when you leave campus."* Meanwhile, Informant C4 from KYU said: *"I visit the library to conduct research. I consult e-resources in case I need to do my research and assignments."*

The data demonstrate the importance of students having access to digital resources and ICT infrastructure that support their academic assignments. Students need to depend on in-library ICT facilities because off-campus access to e-resources is limited due to institutional challenges with licensing and authentication systems. Remote research capabilities suffer due to digital disparities, which emphasise the need for libraries to provide adequate equipment to their users. The research findings of Singh *et al.* (2014) support the observation that library users rely on on-site ICT services due to the insufficient off-campus technological infrastructure.

Secondly, university students do research as part of the requirements to complete their studies. The availability of services students seek indicates libraries' pivotal role in supporting teaching, learning, and research. Users visit libraries because they can find authentic and relevant information materials for research purposes. Additionally, librarians must possess the skills to support research services. E-resources are assigned IP addresses and can only be accessed on campus. Library users also seek information and reference services. As Informant S12 from UCU put it:

Reference services. Since the University library has various service centres, we can get information resources from whichever centre we choose. For example, if I need a book on engineering that is not in the central library, I can be referred to the West End Library and obtain it.



Similarly, Informant C6 from the University KyU said: *“I consult the librarians at the reference desk if I have a question about a particular subject area.”* These statements underscore the continued importance of physical reference services, alongside the vital role librarians play in helping users navigate advanced information systems. The multiple designated service centres at UCU demonstrate a specialised, subject-based service delivery framework. Library users prefer to get help from librarians, demonstrating that personal interactions should remain central to service delivery, as individuals have different levels of independent information retrieval skills. Evidence similar to Arthur and Brafi's (2013) research indicates that users seek staff assistance when exploring collections because academic settings often contain extensive resources that remain unfamiliar. Furthermore, reference Services help library users find information and resources to meet their information needs. Librarians are responsible for helping users navigate the library collection and answering their queries. Reference services can be provided physically or online. Another aspect of a reference service is a referral service, where the librarian can refer a user to another library if the information the user needs is not available in that particular library.

Data collected also indicated that physical reference assistance remains important, as librarians continue to play critical roles in guiding people through complex information systems. The multiple service centres at UCU operate as part of a decentralised service model to meet the specialised needs of specific subjects. Students show a preference for consulting librarians, which demonstrates that personal library service interactions are essential parts of providing helpful services during periods when users display varying levels of independent research competencies. Users depend on staff assistance for collection navigation because Arthur and Brafi (2013) had already noted this tendency in academic environments which possess extensive yet unknown collections.

User education facilitates information retrieval. Librarians empower users with information literacy skills to aid in information search and retrieval. Some techniques used for information retrieval include Boolean logic and many others. For example, Informant S4 said: *“As a library user, I seek user education services. For example, if I need information materials and do not know where to find them, I approach the librarian for help.”* In the case of KyU, Informant C3 said: *“Library Instructions. When I need to find information resources in the library, I visit the library to learn how to search and locate them.”* Overall, the data indicate that information literacy training remains an incomplete component of academic curricula, positioning the library as a primary learning environment for students. The references to “library instructions” demonstrate the necessity for organised user development programs that can be integrated into the academic curriculum. The research results support Mayende *et al.* (2021) in their statement about the need for staff support, along with instructional interventions, to develop a user-centred library environment.

KyU informants further seek document delivery services. As Informant C1 pointed out: *“At times, I seek Document delivery services.”* Similarly, Informant C3 said: *“One time, I visited the library and wanted to consult an information resource that was not available. The librarian ordered it from another library, and I could access it.”* These statements attest to the importance of libraries collaborating through document delivery channels to enable students to access materials that are currently unavailable. The students take advantage of DDS because their institution works to connect students with materials beyond their local collection boundaries. Document delivery systems maintain their crucial value in Uganda,

especially because libraries usually have limited comprehensive materials in every subject field. Student success advances through academic libraries, according to Rodrigues and Bala's (2020) research, as these establishments provide both direct resources and mediated networking services.

Unethical Practices of Librarians at Kyambogo and UC University Libraries

The investigation of unethical practices at Kyambogo and Uganda Christian University prompted students to discuss various unprofessional behaviours that librarians exhibited and how students perceived their conduct. Research participants identified six categories to describe librarian unethical behaviour, including duties abandonment, personal conduct failings, misuse of authority and institutional assets, absenteeism and lateness, visible disengagement, and improper workplace conduct. We used university attendance to classify respondents into different Focus Group (FG) categories. *FG1–FG3 = Focus Groups at Kyambogo University (KyU)*, *FG4–FG6 = Focus Groups at Uganda Christian University (UCU)*.

Neglect of duty and passive disengagement

Users expressed ongoing concerns about the lack of help from librarians, who often failed to assist them in searching for information throughout their research process:

Users sometimes receive no time from certain librarians who neglect their duty to assist with information searches. I want to find information material during my search at the library. I approached a librarian for directions to the OPAC even though she maintained ignorance about my knowledge of the system (FG5, Respondent 4 [UCU]).

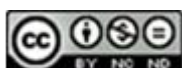
The passive attitude described in this statement slowly destroys users' trust in library personnel. This behaviour demonstrates poor service user orientation because it reveals that staff presence alone does not signify professional commitment to helping others.

Absenteeism, laziness, and tardiness

The participants found librarians' varied workplace hours and messy organisational methods unprofessional: *"Laziness is another unethical practice. You will find books from previous days stacked on reading tables rather than being properly shelved whenever you stop by some morning librarian stations (FG1, Respondent 7 [KyU]).* Students believed that the inadequate supervision of service points, along with insecure book placement, reflected both poor cultural habits and insufficient supervision, as well as the absence of performance standards.

Poor attitude and interpersonal conduct

The students observed negative emotional delivery in service interactions because staff members displayed unfriendly behaviour and hostile speech: *"Librarians occasionally bring their workplace distress to their shifts, which leads them to yell at students who seek help at the reference desk."* (FG4, Respondent 2 [UCU]). The situation highlights the need for stronger emotional professionalism skills, while confirming the importance of soft skills in library service delivery.



Misuse of privileges and institutional resources

The survey participants identified inconsistencies in the rules and discovered unauthorised applications of tools belonging to their institution:

The library policy forbids all student access to telephone calls. Librarians, because they are staff members, believe they can avoid rules which restrict telephonic conversations within the library building – thus, you witness them speaking on their phones (FG5, Respondent 1 [UCU])

Library staff misuse their position by obtaining collections from their purchasing power while using office equipment for both commercial goals and their own purposes (FG2, Respondent 7 [KyU])

Such beliefs hurt institutional credibility by allowing library staff to prioritise rules over students and not exposing future professionals to negative professional models.

Visible disengagement from professional responsibilities

Librarians frequently spent work time on personal entertainment, indicating a general lack of interest in their professional work responsibilities:

The professional commitment of some librarians remains weak, as they fail to fulfil their duties and responsibilities. Librarians occasionally avoid assisting customers while spending their time with earphones playing music or using YouTube (FG6, Respondent 3 [UCU]).

This unprofessional conduct reflects a lack of professional dedication, exposing weaknesses in institutional measures used for employee assessment and supervision.

Unprofessional appearance and workplace decorum

Several participants used improper dress and grooming habits as indicators to determine whether staff displayed pride in their work:

Librarians often present themselves as if they are attending marketplaces because they do not carefully arrange their clothing, and often have untidy hair and facial hair. The librarians lack the habit of tucking their shirts into their pants, and their appearance reflects an unkempt style, characterised by beards and messy hair (FG1, Respondent 9 [KyU]).

This minor perception of unprofessional dress plays a role in concerns about public-facing professionalism and underscores expectations regarding formal decorum in educational environments.

Discussion

The research investigated student needs for library services, as well as unethical behaviour displayed by librarians at Kyambogo University (KyU) and Uganda Christian University (UCU). Academic libraries have been found to serve both roles as academic success tools while also posing ethical disputes in Uganda's higher education system. Research support, along with ICT access, reference assistance, circulation, reading spaces, user education, and access to e-resources and document delivery, comprised the full spectrum of services that students from both institutions required. The essential library services align with published research evidence, which demonstrates why libraries maintain their essential function during digital transitions (Zhang et al., 2021; Jabber, 2019). Students continue to need physical

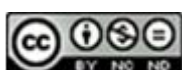
library spaces, along with staff assistance, primarily to navigate complex information systems, despite the availability of online tools. The findings show that students require librarian assistance in navigating information systems, underscoring the ongoing need for librarians to provide academic support. The research showed that the infrastructure needed to provide equal access to students with disabilities remains insufficient. Earlier research (Huwiler, 2015) has shown that institutional inclusivity commitments often fail due to systemic barriers. The research data show that libraries need to fulfil their ethical obligation to provide equal access to information, but instead, they exhibit disturbing and questionable practices on a daily basis. The research has demonstrated that librarians frequently engage in misconduct, which encompasses both absences from work and neglect of duties, as well as showing preferences and misusing institutional resources, and blocking access to content. The study findings align with Owusu-Ansah and Dadzie's (2023) research on Ghanaian academic libraries, which demonstrates that ethical misconduct stems from institutional failures rather than being limited to individual responsibility.

The ethical deviations within higher education can be examined through institutional anomie theory (Messner & Rosenfeld, 2001), which identifies both weak regulatory guidelines and institutional conflicts as contributors to these violations. Professional norms tend to normalise when ethical codes lack adequate enforcement or staff experience inadequate support and high workload pressures. All professional behaviours at this institution reflect a diminished professional culture because they persist despite being unethical, rather than isolated incidents.

The practice of censoring information that reflects religious or ideological perspectives generates significant problems regarding the freedom to access ideas and the unbiased delivery of information services. The ethical requirement to provide inclusive access conflicts with "anti-Christian" material restrictions due to organisational identity requirements as specified in global LIS standards (e.g., IFLA Code of Ethics). The practice of misinformation, along with copyright violations, continues among librarians who either support plagiarism or share inaccurate information. Practices that violate user trust lead to damage to the credibility of libraries as trusted institutions. The principles of inclusivity and equity are violated through accessibility failures, which obstruct service provision to users with disabilities. Against this backdrop, the study suggests that educational success in Uganda is closely tied to academic libraries; however, these institutions often operate with professional standards that vary across facilities and lack comprehensive management. A solution that surpasses established standards must transform institutional environments while investing in moral leaders, along with sustained training for professionals.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The present research investigated the services demanded by LIS students, as well as the unethical practices performed by librarians at Kyambogo University (KyU) and Uganda Christian University (UCU). Research results showed that students across both institutions require the same fundamental library services, which encompass research assistance, ICT facilities, reference help, reading rooms, document distribution services, educational provisions, e-resources, and current awareness programs. These fundamental services constitute academic milestones because they meet the expectations of students who use technology in learning environments. The study documented various unethical actions exhibited by librarians at each institution. Labour issues surrounding absenteeism and



negligence of duty, as well as user contempt, favouritism, unwise resource use, casual attire at work, and discriminatory information practices, were observed. The appearance of unethical behaviours at both institutions demonstrates institutional and cultural barriers to maintaining ethical standards, although their intensity differs. The study results link these behaviours to institutional weakness in ethical enforcement systems and insufficient oversight of professionals, as well as minimal funding for personnel development. Institutional anomie theory supports the research explanation that dysfunctional ethical norms in academic libraries occur because institutions fail to support their professional standards. Academic libraries must establish ethical principles that provide a contextual understanding of live library practices to restore user trust and protect their professional identity.

These research findings support the formulation of several recommendations, which aim to enhance ethical practices while improving service quality for academic libraries in Uganda:

- i. Academic libraries should establish a system of structured Continuous Professional Development (CPD) to enhance professional growth. In this regard, library management needs to establish ongoing CPD training that covers ethical practices alongside user service and information science developments and trends. These measures must align with organisational performance standards while serving as qualification criteria for career growth opportunities.
- ii. Academic libraries in Uganda should enhance their programmes, which focus on ethical awareness and self-assessment practices, such as workshops, along with reflective practice activities and scenario-based learning. These approaches should supplement code dissemination by enabling staff to understand how their behaviour aligns with institutional standards and supports user requirements.
- iii. Universities should implement performance appraisal systems alongside accountability measures, including periodic assessments for staff members that evaluate both ethical actions and service quality performance in accordance with the university's mission, objectives, and professional service requirements.
- iv. The university should establish programmes to encourage the practice of ethical excellence, together with professional conduct standards. Specifically, libraries should establish programmes to appreciate their team members who provide the highest levels of ethical and user-first service. Professional development opportunities, along with promotions and commendations, serve as incentives for staff recognition and appreciation.
- v. The institution should place the recruitment of staff members with professional qualifications at the forefront of its strategic development plan. In this regard, the recruitment procedure should select only personnel who hold LIS degrees and demonstrate a practical understanding of ethical principles under both domestic and international standards.
- vi. The institution should deliver psychological support programmes to staff working in library settings. Particularly, professional institutions must provide psychosocial support programs for librarians so they can handle work-related stress, emotional

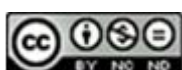
exhaustion, and role conflicts, which might become unethical behaviours due to neglect.

- vii. Academic libraries should establish an ethical framework grounded in local understanding, which they must implement and enforce. Adhering to Ubuntu principles and the operational needs of Ugandan academic librarianship enables institutions to develop self-created ethical guidelines that align with international LIS standards.

Academic libraries that implement these recommended practices will advance their ethics compliance from reactive methods toward establishing cultures that prioritise professionalism, care, and accountability, thus enhancing user satisfaction while boosting institutional credibility.

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