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Legal and Ethical Behaviour in Library and Information Science Students' Research Supervision in Nigeria

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Abstract

Research is at the heart of Library and Information Science (LIS) education across the world. The essence of research is to make new discoveries and extend the frontiers of knowledge in a given field with a view to finding solutions to societal problems. In the LIS field, research has brought about tremendous development to principles and practice which, in turn, has impacted positively on the way information resources are acquired, processed and made accessible for developmental purposes. Critical to successful research outcomes is supervision, particularly for a student researcher carrying out research work in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of a degree. The relationship of the parties in research supervision is governed by legal and ethical considerations. There is a measure of legal and ethical behaviour expected of both the supervisor and the supervisee. This paper, therefore, discusses and makes an exposition of the legal and ethical behaviour expected in research supervision. It concludes by recognising the need for and recommends compliance with legal and ethical standards in LIS research supervision in Nigeria.

Introduction

Research is a crucial component of Library and Information Science (LIS) education. It is undertaken, particularly by students, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of a degree. Depending on the degree programme for which it is undertaken, the end product of a student research is a project, dissertation or thesis which is expected to make significant contribution to knowledge in the field of study.

The term 'research' has been defined in various ways. Cambridge Dictionary Online defines the term as "a detailed study of a subject, especially in order to discover (new) understanding." According to Merriam-Webster, research is "a careful study that is done to find and report new knowledge about something". In a similar vein, BusinessDictionary.com defines it as "systematic investigative process employed to increase or revise current knowledge by discovering new facts." Research is, therefore, a careful and methodological investigation or inquiry aimed at making new discoveries thereby extending the frontiers of knowledge.

Research is key to national development as findings emanating from research properly conducted and the recommendations therein can provide solutions to societal problems. While it is generally believed that the essence of academic research is to extend the frontiers of knowledge, Hayton (2015), however, opined that it is not just about knowledge boundaries extension but breaking "free from limiting personal beliefs about the way things should be". Research, therefore, entails breaking a new ground, moving from known to the unknown and filling the gap in knowledge with a view to solving societal problem and engendering development and growth in all facets of life.

Research Supervision

Supervision is essential to student academic research. Through effective supervision, a student is assisted to achieve his scholastic potential (The University of British Columbia, n.d). Research supervision engenders a lifelong relationship between the supervisor and the student. Lee (2007:681) identified conflicting pressures in research and those relating to supervision are "the pressure to produce high quality original research versus the pressure to complete".

A supervisor often serves as a mentor and is "an example or source of guidance about professional development and how to cope with a host of responsibilities that attend being a research investigator" (Obono, 2005:80). Gbadegesin and Owolabi (2005) described a supervisor and the facilitator of a research serving as an intermediary between the student and the university. According to them, the supervisor is "the one who advises the candidate about the rules and regulations guiding his/her candidacy... and helps at the initial stage of the research in ensuring that the student makes a viable and high quality research design" (Gbadegesin and Owolabi, 2005: 155-156).

A tripartite contract/arrangement exists in research supervision involving the university, the supervisor and the student, each party having its/his/her responsibilities in the arrangement. One vital responsibility of the university is to formulate and implement appropriate policies relating to research. It is to create awareness and ensure compliance with applicable legislations, regulations and guidelines. Gbadegesin and Owolabi (2005: 156) capture the role of the supervisor as follows:

The supervisor is a fellow traveller in the journey the student is about to embark upon, but one who has taken a similar route in the past. He is the one who is to guide the student and show him the way. The supervisor is to help the student identify and avoid the minefields. He is to take the student through the less hazardous paths. The supervisor is also to help the student negotiate the journey from dependence to independence, since the freedom and independence of enquiry is the essence of research.

It is the responsibility of a research supervisor to guide the students in all matters concerning research conduct and to oversee the research process at all stages from the identification of the research objectives to the reporting of the research outcomes as appropriate (Australian Government, 2007). The supervisor is to ensure that the work of the student conforms with the university standards and those set in the LIS field. The supervisor, according to Adetimirin (2015: 136), has the responsibility "to ensure that research students imbibe the right ethical values while they are being supervised".

The student also has his/her own responsibility in research supervision. First and foremost, he/she must be familiar with and adhere to all relevant guidelines, regulations and codes governing the conduct of research. He/she is to maintain a professional relationship with the supervisor and have frequent sessions with him.

Standard Legal Behaviour in Research Supervision

Research supervision entails compliance with certain standard legal principles of behaviour. There are specific regulations put in place by each institution, which more often than not, are in line with global best practices. There are others which are of global application. One key area is the intellectual property right. The supervisor and the student have the obligation to respect the intellectual property right of others. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to draw the attention of the student to the relevant regulations and the policy of the institution on this.

At the University of Ibadan, for instance, there is the Intellectual Property Policy 2012 which defines among others the rights and obligations of researchers. In addition, there is the copyright legislation, and in the case of Nigeria, the Copyright Act, Cap C28, Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004 which requires the recognition of the moral right of an author through

acknowledgement. A researcher is therefore bound to ensure that the intellectual property rights of others are not violated in the conduct of research.

Related to intellectual property right is plagiarism which is an illegal as well as unethical behaviour in research. Plagiarism has been described as a serious academic crime which a researcher can commit (Obono, Ajuwon, Arowojolu, Ogundipe, Yakubu and Falusi, 2006). Typical acts of plagiarism as identified by Plagiarism.org (n.d) include the following:

- Turning in someone else's work as your own
- Copying words or ideas from someone else without giving credit
- Failing to put a quotation in quotation marks
- Giving incorrect information about the source of quotation
- Changing words but copying the sentence structure of a source without giving credit
- Copying so many words or ideas from a source that it makes up the majority of one's work, whether credit is given or not.

A supervisor, therefore, had the responsibility to guide the student to avoid being involved in plagiarism. To be able to do so competently, a supervisor, in addition to creating awareness on the evil and repercussions of plagiarism, must be familiar with the literature in the field. It is only when a supervisor has such in-depth knowledge that he can be able to have reasonable suspicion of plagiarism on the part of the student and nip it in the bud ever before the need to subject the work to the test of a plagiarism detection software arises. This then brings to the fore the need for supervision to be in a supervisor's comfort zone.

Apart from appropriating other people's ideas and works, it is also possible to plagiarize one's own previous works and ideas if used without circumspection and attribution. This is known as self-plagiarism and should be avoided. Again, apart from words and ideas taken from someone else without attribution, plagiarism is also committed when tables and figures not generated from the primary data but derived from some other sources are used without due acknowledgement.

As part of the legal obligations in research, confidentiality of information, particularly sources of data in appropriate cases, must be maintained. The supervisor is, therefore, enjoined to guide the student to ensure that such information is not unduly disclosed. Relating to this is the need to respect and protect the privacy of individuals. This is a fundamental right enshrined in the constitution of most democratic countries and in specific legislations such as the Privacy Act. To this extent, research student and supervisor are to ensure that nothing is done that can violate the privacy and dignity of individuals who are human subjects of research. Anonymity of respondents should also be maintained, as respondents may sometimes be put at risk of victimisation or being discriminated against if their identity is revealed.

Standard Ethical Behaviour

Just as research ethics is concerned with good and acceptable conduct in research, there are also standard ethical behaviours in research supervision. Since the supervisor and the student are co-travellers in the voyage of discovery which research is, they must, first and foremost, ensure strict adherence to research ethics.

Research ethics , according Obono et al. (2006: 284), "specifically deal with the application of rules and professional codes of conduct to the collection, collation, analysis, reporting and dissemination of information about research subjects, whether individually or as a group, especially as regards active acceptance of subjects' right to privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent." They are rules of good and acceptable conduct in the process of conducting research.

In the Australian Code for the Conduct of Research (Australian Government, 2007), research misconduct is identified to include falsification, plagiarism, deception in proposing, carrying out or

reporting the results of research and failure to declare or manage a serious conflict of interest. A researcher must not therefore falsify data. He must be diligent in the collection of data with written approval being obtained from the appropriate ethics committee in case of research involving human participants and vulnerable groups. There must be respect for research participants and strict compliance with the ethical principles of integrity, respect for persons, justice and beneficence (Australian Government, 2007).

Data collected must not be hastily destroyed. They must be retained for a minimum period of time as required by the relevant code or specified in the policy of the institution concerned. The minimum period for the retention of data in most cases suggested in the Australian Code is five years from the date of publication. However, for student research project, a retention period of twelve months after the completion of the project is considered sufficient.

The issue of plagiarism has been extensively discussed. It may be added, however, that while it is imperative to duly acknowledge all the works and ideas of others used, it is unethical to make phantom citation, i.e. citing an article that is not in existence. Data presentation should be carefully done and the research findings accurately and honestly reported except for honest and unintentional human errors. Issues that may bring about or fall within the purview of conflict of interest must be avoided, disclosed and/or resolved.

According to Monash University (n.d.) 'conflicts of interest are defined as situations where there exists or appears to exist a divergence between the interests of the supervisor and those of the student, or between the interests of the student and the supervisors and those of the university, such that an independent observer might reasonably question whether the professional actions or decisions of that person have been influenced by his/her own interests.' Such situations include project funding management with an organisation, close association between the supervisor and the student that could give undue advantage or disadvantage to the student, and relationships between an examiner, the student and the supervisor that could also give undue advantage or disadvantage to the student.

Good Student-Supervisor Relationship

A good student-supervisor relationship is the bedrock of a successful research supervision. As indicated earlier, supervision is a tripartite contractual arrangement involving the student, the supervisor and the university. The supervisor serves as an intermediary between the student and the university. A cordial relationship and mutual trust should therefore exist between the student and the supervisor in order to have a successful and pleasant supervision experience. According to Trinity College Dublin (2012), the student and the supervisor "can contribute to this relationship through interactions based on mutual respect and confidentiality, courtesy, accessibility, clarity of communication and application of effort." The relationship may be a lifelong one if properly managed. In the words of Kolawole (2016:32), "a student's project could be supervised in a friendly manner without one compromising standards."

There should be mutual respect between the student and the supervisor. A servant/master relationship will not, on the long run, make for long lasting relationship between the student and the supervisor. It is unwholesome for the supervisor to make it a habit to engage the student in running errands for him, particularly in domestic respect and other areas that have nothing to do with academic pursuit. It is also unethical for the supervisor to compel the student to search for literature meant for his own personal study.

Another important area of ethical consideration is the giving of gifts by the student to the supervisor. The supervisor should be cautious or even refrain from accepting gifts from student, particularly expensive gifts that are meant to serve as gratification. It is unethical for students to provide food or refreshment for staff of the department or examiners in the course of seminar paper presentation or final oral defence. The Postgraduate School of the University of Ibadan forbids such practice. Besides, a student and a supervisor of the opposite sex should avoid what Harrar, Vandecreek and Knapp (1990) called ''Dual Relationships'' which refers to romantic and sexually

intimate relationships between the student and the supervisor. They opined that even if such relationship is willingly irritated by the student, it will amount to a violation for a supervisor to accede to it.

As it is for other areas of human endeavour, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has a pervading influence on student research supervision. As such, the hardship experienced in the past when a supervisor is away from the university has been considerably reduced. Distance and time difference are no longer serious barriers to interaction between a student and his supervisor, as ICT affords them the opportunity to discuss and send research materials via the Internet. However, the physical face-to-face interaction is still desirable, and it is important for a supervisor to notify the student when going on leave for a period of two weeks or more. The supervision guidelines of some institutions even stipulate that in the event of a period of leave exceeding six weeks, an alternative supervisor should be appointed before the departure of the supervisor (Monash University, n.d.). The code of the Postgraduate School of the University of Ibadan recognises a period of absence not exceeding three months after which alternative supervision arrangement will be made. In the same vein, the supervisor has the obligation of notifying the student of his intention to cease employment at the university.

The dissemination of research outcomes, particularly in journal articles, raises the issue of authorship. It is not out of place for the student and the supervisor to co-author a journal article emanating from the research. Usually, the student is the first author. There could, however, be agreement on this between the supervisor and the student. It is wrong for the student to attribute authorship to a person for contribution other than academic or substantial intellectual involvement in the research. Substantial contributions, according to Australian Government (2007), are in the following areas:

i.   Conceptual and design of the project;
ii.   Analysis and interpretation of research data; and
iii.   Drafting significant parts of the work or critically revising it so as to contribute to the interpretation.

It is, however, acceptable to acknowledge or include in a publication all sources of funding and other supports for the research. There is a room for acknowledgement in most well-established journals.

Conclusion

Research supervision is an important function of LIS educators. It is a process that involves human interaction, particularly between a student and a supervisor or, in some cases, between a student and a supervisory team. Even in cases where a supervisory team is involved, there is usually the main supervisor. Legal and ethical principles which stipulate the acceptable standard of behaviour are, therefore, essential to guide the student/supervisor relationship. Both the student and the supervisor have the duty to conform to these legal and ethical requirements of research supervision. They are to ensure that their behaviour is in consonance with the high level of integrity expected of a researcher and a supervisor. The academic institution also has the responsibility to formulate necessary guidelines and ethical code for research supervision as well as ensure strict compliance by the student and the supervisor. It is by so doing that there can be a huge good success in LIS research supervision in Nigeria.

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