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Practice of Professional Ethics by Librarians: A Case Study of the University of Calicut

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Abstract

The study analyses the practice of professional ethics among library professionals of the University of Calicut, based on the framework of the IFLA code of ethics for librarians and information workers. The professionals, attitude to ensure patrons access to information, keenness in fulfilling their responsibilities towards individuals and society, attitude towards the rights of authors and the right of users for access to information, and views on neutrality, integrity, skill development and about the codes of professional ethics, they practice it in routine work in their respective libraries. More than 50% of the librarians express their strong opinion on the various aspects examined. It is recommended to have a detailed coverage of professional ethics in LIS curricula, to hold conferences/seminars on the topic and to frame a code of ethics for the Indian situation.

Keywords: Professional Ethics; Code of Ethics; Library Associations; Professionalism

1. Introduction

A profession is a type of vocation that requires special training, education or skill. A profession comprises a body of people who carry on their duties in accordance with rules designed to enforce certain standards with two main objectives – the better protection of its members and the better service to the public (Headicar, 1911). The essential elements of a profession include a systematic body of theory, a level of authority, community sanction and approval, a code of ethics, a culture and service orientation. Librarianship and information science (LIS), which has been accepted for long as a profession, also has these component elements applicable. The prime motto of professional ethics in LIS is to provide library service to the patrons with full dedication and involvement. A library professional

has the responsibility to build a strong knowledge base and to be a life long learner. He/she should not show any kind of bias while providing service. Personal bias should not interfere while providing user service. Ethics helps a professional to know what is expected of him/her by the society as well as by the profession, how to conduct oneself and prepare oneself to meet the demands of the users, and how to uphold the values and keep the profession at a higher pedestal in the eyes of the users or society in general. Librarians' associations have long been concerned with ethical issues and practices, and many have promulgated ethical codes to guide and sometimes regulate the professional activities of their memberships. The American Library Association (ALA) was among the first to publish a Code of Ethics in 1938, and

this code (as amended) has been recognized by many as the standard for codes of ethics for librarianship. Another important code is that formulated by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). The present study attempts to investigate the practice of professional ethics by the LIS professionals in the University of Calicut, using the IFLA code of ethics for librarians and information workers as the yardstick.

2. Review of Literature

The term ethics is derived from the Greek word 'ethos' which means custom or character. Ethics, as per the current usage, is a set of moral principles that govern a person – his conduct, behavior, character, fairness, humbleness, morality, values, commitment, duties to self and to the society at large, and his obligation to the profession, to the institution and the society. Without a set of basic or fundamental principles and ethics no occupation can be considered a profession. In the field of LIS, a number of noteworthy codes of ethics have been issued by library associations all over the world. Giving the background of a historical perspective on the need for and basis for codes of ethics, Koehler & Pemberton (2000) propose the outlines of a model code for information professionals.

There was no formal code of ethics for librarians in Britain until 1983, and ethical values were passed on by example rather than precept (Sturges, 2003). The crisis in the profession that took place in 1970s led to a series of discussions within the Library Association and a draft code was issued in 1981. Though there were strong criticism of the draft, it became the basis of the formal Library Association code. It has seldom been tested as a disciplinary instrument. Subsequently when the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) was formed there was renewed interest in ethical issues and the need for a CILIP Code. Highlighting the importance of information ethics to the twenty-first century library professionals, Koehler (2003) argues that in the field of LIS, values and ethics may be interpreted and applied in a variety of ways and through a variety of institutions. The LIS

community has not been as responsive as it might be to these issues. Therefore, LIS educators have to first seek to identify the scope of the issues and then help students engage in practice of professional ethics. Fallis (2007) examines the views of various authors as to how information ethics (IE) can be applied to the ethical dilemmas faced by library professionals and the need for LIS professionals to have good working knowledge of IE. Courses on IE must be part of the education of information professionals. Such courses should provide library professionals with an understanding of ethical theories and how they apply to concrete practical cases. With the proposition that LIS programs must focus on introducing students to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for the profession, Carbo (2008) provides an overview of IE education, using the University of Pittsburgh as a case study, and addresses the questions of what IE content should be included in LIS programs, how and by whom the content should be taught.

An article by Beghtol (2008) addresses the context and content of ethical activities and decisions in knowledge organization and cataloging. It presents the core value of access to information as stated in professional codes of ethics and shows how these codes govern consensual issues in knowledge organization and classification. The article provides some basic guidelines for establishing ethical policies for knowledge organization and cataloging. Mitchell (2013) gives a brief note on the role of ethics codes. An analysis of ethical values related to archival sciences in the national codes of professional ethics of Brazil, Portugal, France, Spain, Australia, Canada, USA, New Zealand, United Kingdom and Switzerland and the ICA codes of ethics is given by da Silva et al (2015). Applying a content analysis, the authors have subjected to analysis the points such as access and use, authenticity, confidentiality, conservation, custody, impartiality, information access, information security, physical preservation of the record, reliability, respect for provenance, respect for the original order, and respect for the preservation of the archival value of the record.

Ferguson et al (2016) report on a research project that investigated how the LIS professionals experience ethical dilemmas, with particular reference to the impact of new technologies, sources used to assist ethical decision-making, and the contribution that case studies can make to ethical understanding and decision-making. The findings identify the main types of dilemma raised and discuss cases indicative of each type. Hariharan & Tamizhchelvan (2016) conducted a study to analyze the ethics of library professional's relation with organization and professionalism among self-financing engineering college libraries in Tamil Nadu. The paper focuses on library professional's relationship with the institution and ethical issues of competence development. The major finding is that the proposed ethical elements have been well agreed to by the library professionals except for a few elements. The library professionals have the ethical obligation to maintain good relations with the organization to get the needed infrastructure to provide effective services. Santana & Nunes (2017) address the relationship between deontology, professional ethics and unionism in Brazilian librarianship, intending to understand how the process of institutional-political interaction of the area is situated in the educational and professional context. The paper presents concepts related to ethics as a science and its importance in the different fields. It evokes the historical elements of the trade union movement in England and its arrival in Brazil and the beginning of the unionization of Brazilian librarians. The paper highlights the need to broaden the debates about professional ethics and the maturation of class consciousness in librarianship.

Moradi et al (2018) investigated the relationship between spiritual intelligence and professional ethics of librarians of medical universities in Iran. An applied analytical survey was carried out among a population of 65 librarians. A questionnaire of professional ethics and King's spiritual intelligence self-report inventory were used for data collection. Four elements of spiritual intelligence such as critical existential thinking, personal meaning production, transcendental consciousness and consciousness

state expansion were measured. The Pearson correlation and independent t-test were used to find out the relationship between variables. The total mean of spiritual intelligence components was 45.52 which is at a moderate level. In the case of professional ethics, the level component is 82.39 which is a very good level. The results state that there is no significant positive relationship between spiritual intelligence and professional ethics. The paper concludes stating that spiritual intelligence is not able to predict the professional ethics of librarians working at the Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences.

Jones & Saloln (2018) discuss learning analytics and the ways academic libraries are beginning to participate in wider institutional learning analytics initiatives. Since there are moral issues associated with learning analytics, the authors consider how data mining practices run counter to ethical principles in the American Library Association's "Code of Ethics." Munigal (2018) observes that even though LIS education started in India in 1911, there is no code of ethics and professional conduct for LIS professionals. The author suggests and presents a code that is based upon internationally acknowledged ethical standards and principles. The review shows that studies which evaluate practice of professional ethics in LIS field using the code of ethics formulated by international professional associations are few in number, and hence there is relevance for the present study.

3. Objectives of the Study

As already stated, the aim of the study is to make an assessment as to what extent the LIS professionals practice professional ethics, taking the professionals of the University of Calicut as a case. In specific terms, the study has the following objectives.

- To identify as to what extent the professionals take efforts to ensure the patrons access to information.
- To find out whether the professionals are keen to fulfill their responsibilities towards individuals and society.

- To ascertain the attitude of the professionals towards the rights of authors and the right of users for access to information.
- To find out the professionals' views on neutrality, integrity, skill development and interpersonal relationships.

4. Methodology

The study is focused on how far the LIS professionals practice professional ethics in their day-to-day works and services. Survey method using questionnaire is adopted for data collection. The population comprises the professionals working in central libraries, department libraries and in outstation centers of University of Calicut. An online questionnaire was developed based on the framework of the IFLA code of ethics for library professionals. A google form was created and was shared with the respondents through email and Whatsapp. Those who preferred to have the print version of questionnaire were also given it. Out of the sixty LIS professionals, fifty-five have participated in the study by furnishing the details sought. The data obtained were subjected to quantitative analysis and inferences were drawn.

5. Analysis and Interpretation of Data

5.1 Demographic Profile

Out of the fifty five respondents, 49% are male and 51% females. Age group of 31-40 years forms the modal group (46.2%). The 41-50 years group forms 38.5% and 15.3% are of more than 50 years. Their experience in library service is in the range of 5 to more than 20 years. Those with 11 to 15 years experience form the modal group (37%). About 30% have experience in the range of 6 to 10 years, 9.3% have 16 to 20 years service and 22.2% have more than 20 years. Designation-wise, the respondents consist of one Deputy Librarian, 10 Assistant Librarians, 13 Junior Librarians, 19 Professional Assistants (grade I) and 10 Professional Assistants (grade II). Regarding professional qualification, 84.9% have MLISc degree, 5.7% have M Phil degree and 11.3% have Ph.D.

5.2 Access to Information

The core mission of the LIS profession is to

ensure all the patrons access to information for their cultural enrichment, education, personal development, leisure, economic activity and informed participation in and enhancement of democracy. Librarians and information workers should discard censorship in all its forms, support provision of services free of cost to patrons and promote services and collections to potential users and seek the highest standard of accessibility to both virtual and physical services. Librarians should reject the denial and restriction of ideas and information through censorship. If membership fee or administrative charges are inevitable the librarians should keep make it as low as possible. A few questions were framed keeping the above points and analysis showed that the majority of library professionals make effective ways to ensure all their patrons access to information without any hindrance. Out of respondents, 24% stated that they resist all efforts to censor library resources to a very great extent and 47% to a great extent. Most of the library professionals (27%) keep administrative charges as low as possible to a very great extent and 41% keep them to great extent. Twenty three percent of respondents maintain international standards for accessibility to a very great extent and 48% to a great extent. Graphical representation of library professionals, attitude to access to information is represented in Figure1.

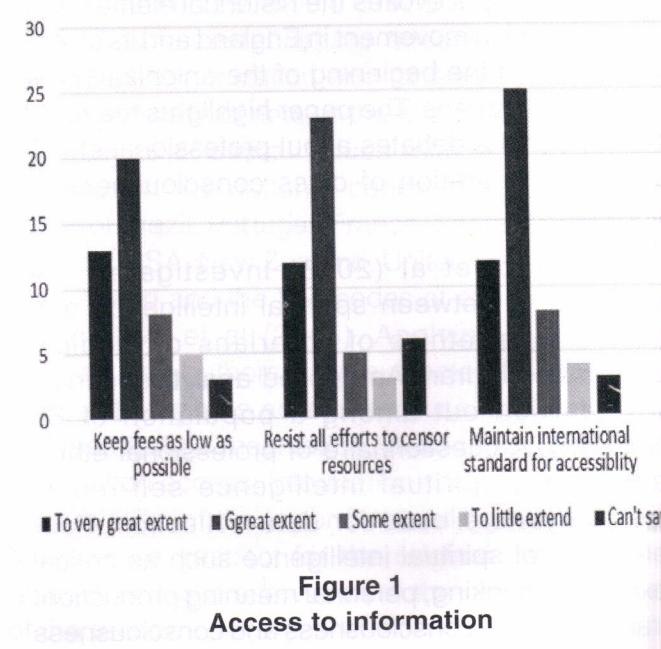


Figure 1

Access to information

5.3 Responsibilities Towards Individuals and Society

In order to make sure that there exists no discrimination, the LIS professionals have to provide equitable service for everyone without any bias regarding their age, gender political identity, belief, educational qualification, income, marital status, origin, race, religion or gender. Librarians should organize and present the content in such a manner that an autonomous user can find information themselves. They should support and help users in information searching. Library professionals should offer services that increase the reading skills of users. They should promote information literacy and must eliminate plagiarism and misuse of information. The response to questions on these aspects shows that majority (81%) of library professionals didn't show any bias regarding age, gender, religion, income, education or political belief in providing information to users. The majority of the library professionals (72%) make deliberate attempt to organize and display information resources in such a way that everyone, autonomous user, can find their required information themselves without other's assistance. Eighty seven percent of the respondents admit that they assist users in their information search. Among library professionals 66% eliminated plagiarism and misuse of information always and 23% often. Out of the respondents 63% promote

information literacy always and 31% often. Out of the library professionals 56% offer services to increase reading skills always and 25% often. Overall analysis shows that library professionals are keen to fulfill their responsibilities towards the patrons - individuals and society.

5.4 Privacy, Secrecy and Transparency

Library professionals should respect personal privacy and protection of personal data of users. Library professionals should ensure that the users' data are not shared beyond original transactions and should respect the users' confidentiality with respect to the information received and resources consulted. The analysis of the response of LIS professionals on these factors shows that 78% of library professionals respect personal privacy and protection of personal data always and 19% often. The majority of library professionals (69%) ensure that the user's data are not shared beyond original transaction. Seventy percent of the professionals respect user's confidentiality with respect to information received and resources consulted always and 30% often. Graphical representation of library professionals' views about privacy, secrecy and transparency is given in figure 2.

5.5 Open Access and Intellectual Property

The best possible access to information and ideas in any format or media to library users must

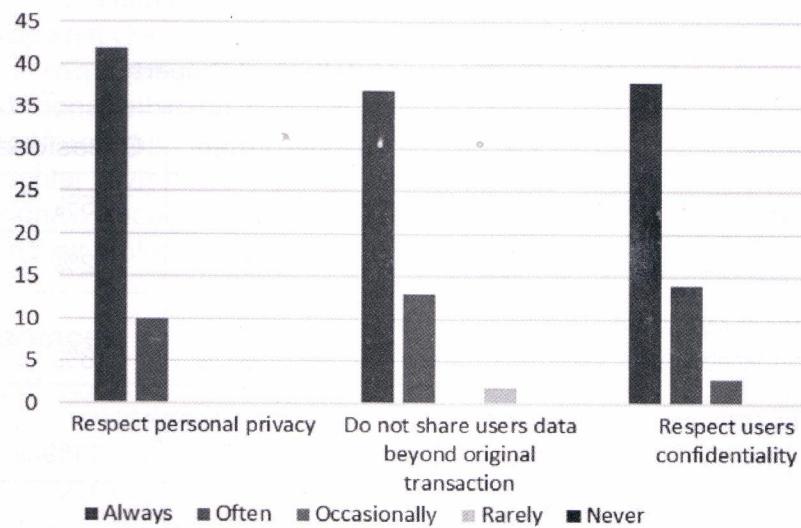


Figure 2
Privacy, secrecy, and transparency

be the keen interests of library and information workers. For this, they have to support principles of open access, open-source and open licenses. Librarians should aim to provide effective and economical access to information to users. Library professionals have a professional duty to advocate for limitations and exceptions to copyright restrictions for libraries. They have to make sure that the intellectual property rights of authors and other creators are respected. They should maintain a balancing act between intellectual property rights and rights of access. Analysis of library professionals, attitude towards open access and intellectual property is shown in Table 1. More than 50% of the professionals are always keen in protecting the rights of both the authors and users.

5.6 Neutrality, Personal Integrity and Professional Skills

Library professionals should have an unbiased stance regarding service, collection and access. Neutrality results in the most balanced access to information achievable and the most balanced collection. For that library professionals should define and publish their policies for selection, organisation, preservation, provision and dissemination of information. They should distinguish between professional duties and personal convictions. Library professionals should counter corruption directly affecting librarianship and also strive for excellence in the profession by

enhancing and maintaining their skills and knowledge. They should aim at highest standards of quality of service and thus promote positive reputation of library profession.

By the analysis of the response of LIS professionals on these aspects it is found that 76% of library professionals maintain neutrality and unbiased stance regarding the collection, access and service always and 22% often and 2% occasionally. Of the total respondents, 40% define and publish policies for selection, organization and dissemination of information always and 29% often and 15% occasionally and 8% rarely and 8% never. The majority of respondents (83%) do not advance private interest or personal belief at the expense of users, colleagues or institutions. The majority of library professionals (88%) strive for excellence in the profession by enhancing their knowledge and skills. Out of the respondents 73% aim at highest level of service quality always and 19% often and 8% occasionally. Among library professionals 85% promote the positive reputation of the profession always and 15% often.

5.7 Colleague and Employer/Employee Relationship

Library professionals should treat each other with fairness and respect and must share professional experience with colleagues. They should guide and help new professionals to enter

Table 1
Open Access and Intellectual Property

| Sl. No. | Statements | Always | Often | Occasionally | Rarely | Never |
|---------|---|--------|-------|--------------|--------|-------|
| 1 | Support principles of open access | 83% | 12% | 5% | | |
| 2 | Provide effective access to information | 77% | 17% | 2% | 2% | 2% |
| 3 | Advocates for limitation to copyright restriction to libraries | 51% | 37% | 8% | 4% | |
| 4 | Respects intellectual property rights of authors and other creators | 65% | 24% | 11% | | |
| 5 | Maintain a balancing act between intellectual property rights and right of access | 56% | 30% | 14% | | |

the professional community and develop their skills. Library professionals should contribute to the activities of the library profession and participate in research and publication on professional matters. They should not compete with colleagues through unfair methods. Out of the library professionals 85% treat colleagues with fairness and respect always and 13% often and 2% occasionally. The majority of library professionals (95%) shared their professional experience with colleagues. Of the respondents 72% help and guide new professionals always and 25% often and 3% occasionally. Among the library professionals 33% participate in research and publication on professional matters always and 29% often and 14% occasionally and 12% rarely and 12% never. The analysis shows that the research and publication of library professionals are at a moderate level.

6. Conclusion

Overall analysis shows that even though the library professionals have not read the code of ethics of library association they practice professional ethics at a higher level in the library activities and services. In India, there is no regular revision of the code of ethics by library associations which is their prime duty. Though the curricula of LIS courses include professional ethics as a topic of study, it is only at peripheral level, without going into detail. Conferences/seminars on the theme professional ethics are at a minimal level. There are no strict measures against violation of code of ethics. So there is a requirement of more consideration for professional ethics in syllabus and seminars and conferences. There is an immediate need for regular revision of code of ethics. Library professionals should earn status and reputation based on their professionalism and ethical behavior.

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To cite this article

Prasanth, M., & Vasudevan, T. M. (2019). Practice of Professional Ethics by Librarians: A Case Study of the University of Calicut. *ILIS Journal of Librarianship and Informatics*, 2(2), 49–56.