

Professional Conduct of Academic Staff in Public Universities in Kenya: Learners' Perception

Paul K. Wainaina
Andanje Mwisukha
Elijah Gitonga Rintaugu

Kenyatta University
Kenya

Abstract

One of the key roles and responsibilities of academic staff in a university is to develop the intellectual capacity of their learners by imparting knowledge and skills. They also play a fundamental role in moulding the behaviour and character of their learners. To be able to carry out these roles, the university's academic staff must exhibit standard of conduct that is beyond reproach. Given their high standing in the world of academia, coupled with the roles expected of them, the society expects university academic staff to be role-models and mentors to their learners. They must exhibit professional competence, integrity, trust and respect as these are crucial attributes to the all-round growth of their students. The academic staff, like other professionals, should cooperate and work as a team for the good of their learners. This study therefore, focused on evaluation of the conduct of academic staff in selected public universities in Kenya from the perceptions of their learners. It was an exploratory study that involved a sample of 50 students who were randomly selected from three public universities in the country. The findings indicate that the academic staff exhibited fairly morally acceptable conduct on some behavioral characteristics but not on others.

Introduction

A key characteristic element of any profession is a code of ethics which regulates the conduct and behaviour of professionals in any one given field (Davis, 2002). A professional code of ethics also serves as an instrument for ensuring that professionals offer quality service and effectively cater for the needs of their clients. In other words, it prohibits inappropriate behaviour by professionals. It is a central guide and reference for professionals in their day-to-day decision-making. It is for these reasons that professional associations formulate professional codes of conduct for their members, including the teaching profession. Given that academic staff in the universities are essentially teachers and mentors of their learners, they are obliged to conduct themselves in a highly professional manner.

As educators, the academic staff in the universities must consistently strive to create learning environments that fully develop the potentials of their learners. They are duty-bound to act with conscientious effort to exhibit high standards of conduct, as well as take responsibility to teach their learners morally acceptable character qualities. One of the areas of professional conduct of the educators in universities is professional competence and integrity which relates to their academic soundness, competence in teaching and inclination to continuous professional growth Davis, 2002 (a); Davis 2002 (b). Professional integrity can be exhibited in terms of the manner of dressing, undivided loyalty to one's professional work, sound judgment and commitment to equality, inclusion and ability to accommodate diversity (NASW, 1015). Owing to the fact that educators have the duty of care for their learners, their conduct towards them must be directed towards their all-round development.

In this respect, the university educators should be caring, fair and committed to the needs and best interests of their clients who are basically their learners. Employing high standards in students' assessment, as well as refraining from intimate (sexual) relationships and emotional harassment of them is the most ethical way of educators' conduct towards their learners (Davis, 2002 b).

A professional educator should exemplify ethical relations with members of his/her profession by treating them with respect, dignity and fairness as their cooperation and teamwork is crucial to their effective service to their students (Dobrin, 2002; Sidgwick, 2015). Among other things, the educator should at all times refrain from revealing confidential information or make false and derogatory statements concerning colleagues (Davis, 2002 b). It is in the light of this background that this study made insights into the conduct of academic staff in selected public universities in Kenya. Specifically, the broad areas of professional conduct that were addressed included their professional competence and integrity, conduct towards their students, as well as their conduct towards their professional colleagues.

Methodology

This was an exploratory descriptive survey research. A total of 50 students from three public universities in Kenya were randomly selected as respondents. A questionnaire that comprised of items on a five-point likert scale was constructed based on the variables of the study and used to collect data. The data was analyzed descriptively using mean and standard deviation measures as well as t-test and One-Way Analysis of Variance at 0.05 level of significance.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 shows the demographic data of the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Respondents

Gender	n	%
Male	32	51.6
Female	30	48.4
Year of Study		
Second	15	24.2
Third	23	37.1
Fourth	22	35.5
Fifth	2	3.2

Table 1 shows that 32 (51.6%) of the respondents were male while 30 (48.4%) were female. This shows that there was balanced representation of both male and female learners in the research. The largest proportion of them was in their third year of study, followed by those who were in fourth and second years of study respectively. This implies that majority of the respondents had been in the universities long enough to be able to give informed opinions on the conduct of their academic staff. The participants' responses to lecturers' professional competence, conduct towards lecturers and students are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations of Learners' Responses on their Lecturers' Professional Competence and Integrity, Conduct Towards their Students and Colleagues

Item	x	SD
Professional Competence and Integrity of Academic Staff		
(i) Strive to demonstrate devotion, academic soundness and competence in teaching.	1.67	0.74
(ii) Strive for continuous professional development.	1.51	0.50
(iii) Co-operate with the authorities for betterment of my University.	1.61	0.77
(iv) Dress with decorum.	1.51	0.69
(v) Show commitment to equality, inclusion and accommodate diversity.	1.45	0.69
(vi) Try to avoid conflict between their professional work and private interests.	1.64	0.74
(vii) Strive not to practice while under the influence of any substance which impairs their judgment and behaviour.	1.59	0.68
Conduct of Academic Staff Towards Students		
(i) Are caring, fair and committed to the best interests of their students	1.74	0.69
(ii) Recognize and respect the uniqueness, individuality and specific needs of students.	1.74	0.78
(iii) Strive to maintain high standards in relation to students' monitoring, assessment and provision of feedback.	1.67	0.62
(iv) Refrain from sexual abuse, mental & emotional harassment of students	1.67	0.80
Conduct of Academic Staff Towards their Fellow Academic Staff members		
(i) Treat other academic staff members with respect and dignity.	1.59	0.61
(ii) Do not reveal confidential information or make false statements concerning colleagues or University system.	1.75	0.80
(iii) Collaborate with colleagues in realization of the highest quality of educational experiences for students.	1.66	0.76

With regards to the items under professional competence and integrity, the perception that lecturers strive to demonstrate devotion, academic soundness and competence in teaching had the highest mean (1.67 ± 0.740) followed by avoiding conflict (1.64 ± 0.74) and third was lecturers' co-operation with authorities (1.61 ± 0.77). However, these mean values were very low (less than average mean of 2.5); this suggests that the students perceived their lecturers as having fairly low professional competence and integrity.

As regards conduct of the academic staff towards students, they were perceived to be caring, fair and committed to the best interests of their students (1.74 ± 0.69) and recognized students' uniqueness (1.74 ± 0.78). The other two items on standards of academic staff's monitoring, assessment and provision of feedback to their learners, as well as harassment had similar means of 1.67 ± 0.62 . It is however, important to note that these mean measures are lower than the average mean of 2.5 as per the likert scale; this implies that the conduct of the academic staff towards their students was rated as being low.

With regard to the participants' responses on conduct towards academic staff members, the students were of the view that the academic staff do not reveal confidential information about other members of staff (1.75 ± 0.80), followed by the perception that they collaborated with other lecturers (1.66 ± 0.76). However, generally the rating of the learners of the conduct of the academic staff towards their colleagues was generally low across all the variables.

The study sought to establish whether the perceptions of the students would differ based on their gender and year of study. The t-test was used to determine if the responses differed significantly or not. A summary of the results based on respondents' gender are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: t-test Results on Respondents' Perceptions Across Gender

Item	n	t	df	Sign
Professional Competence and Integrity of Academic Staff				
(i) Strive to demonstrate devotion, academic soundness and competence in teaching.	62	0.11	60	0.91
(ii) Strive for continuous professional development.	62	-1.80	60	0.076
(iii) Co-operate with the authorities for betterment of my University.	62	0.77	60	0.43
(iv) Dress with decorum.	62	0.53	60	0.59
(v) Show commitment to equality, inclusion and accommodate diversity.	62	-0.52	60	0.59
(vi) Try to avoid conflict between their professional work and private interests.	62	0.79	60	0.42
(vii) Strive not to practice while under the influence of any substance which impairs their judgement and behaviour.	62	1.84	60	0.70
Conduct of Academic Staff Towards Students				
(i) Are caring, fair and committed to the best interests of their students	62	0.93	60	0.92
(ii) Recognize and respect the uniqueness, individuality and specific needs of students.	62	-1.21	60	0.23
(iii) Strive to maintain high standards in relation to students' monitoring, assessment and provision of feedback.	62	1.80	60	0.077
(iv) Refrain from sexual abuse, mental & emotional harassment of students	62	1.05	60	0.29
Conduct of Academic Staff Towards their Fellow Academic Staff members				
(i) Treat other academic staff members with respect and dignity.	62	2.08	60	0.04
(ii) Do not reveal confidential information or make false statements concerning colleagues or University system.	62	0.86	60	0.39
(iii) Collaborate with colleagues in realization of the highest quality of educational experiences for students.	62	1.62	60	0.10

Results in Table 3 reveal that the only significant differences were noted on the conduct of lecturers treating other academic staff members with respect and dignity ($t = 2.08$, $df = 60$, $p > 0.04$). In this respect, male students had higher means (1.75) than female (1.43); this implies that more male than female students were of the view that the academic staff treated their colleagues with respect and dignity. The observation that there were no significant differences in the perceptions of the male and female learners on the rest of the variables implies that they had common viewpoint on them. This lack of significant differences between male and female is interesting as it was expected that female students would be more versatile about the professional conduct of their lecturers.

The ANOVA results on learners' responses based on their year of study are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Learners' Responses on Conduct of their Lecturers Based on Their (Learners') Year of Study

Item	F	Sign
Professional Competence and Integrity of Academic Staff		
(i) Strive to demonstrate devotion, academic soundness and competence in teaching.	3.32	0.026
(ii) Strive for continuous professional development.	0.94	0.42
(iii) Co-operate with the authorities for betterment of my University.	0.98	0.40
(iv) Dress with decorum.	0.63	0.59
(v) Show commitment to equality, inclusion and accommodate diversity.	0.86	0.46
(vi) Try to avoid conflict between their professional work and private interests.	2.81	0.04
(vii) Strive not to practice while under the influence of any substance which impairs their judgment and behaviour.	2.38	0.78
Conduct of Academic Staff Towards Students		
(i) Are caring, fair and committed to the best interests of their students	2.50	0.68
(ii) Recognize and respect the uniqueness, individuality and specific needs of students.	5.22	0.003
(iii) Strive to maintain high standards in relation to students' monitoring, assessment and provision of feedback.	3.15	0.32
(iv) Refrain from sexual abuse, mental & emotional harassment of students	2.20	0.09
Conduct Academic Staff Towards their Fellow Academic Staff members		
(i) Treat other academic staff members with respect and dignity.	0.76	0.52
(ii) Do not reveal confidential information or make false statements concerning colleagues or University system.	0.14	0.93
(iii) Collaborate with colleagues in realization of the highest quality of educational experiences for students.	1.19	0.31

*Significant at 0.05

It is evident from table 4 that the responses of the learners based on their year groups did not significantly differ on most of the items relating to the professional competence and integrity of their academic staff except on two items: their devotion, academic soundness and competence in teaching as well as their efforts to avoid conflict between their professional work and private interests. On the aspect of their devotion, academic soundness and competence, the responses of the fifth year students differed significantly from those of the students in other academic years of study; the fifth year students' responses had a higher mean than the rest. This can be attributed to the fact that due to their longer stay at the universities, the fifth year students were more conversant with the conduct of their educators and had developed rapport and bonding with them (academic staff) than the other students at the lower levels of study.

Table 4 shows that there were no significant differences in the responses of the learners on most of the items relating to the conduct of the academic staff towards their students except on the variable of the lecturers' requirement of recognizing and respecting the uniqueness, individuality and specific needs of their learners. The second year students' responses yielded a higher mean than those of the other students at other academic levels.

With regard to the lecturers' conduct towards their fellow colleagues, the responses of the learners did not significantly differ across their academic years of study. This implies that the conduct of the academic staff was highly acceptable on the aspect that they did not reveal confidential information or make false statements concerning their colleagues or university system but their treatment of their colleagues with respect and dignity was rated least.

Conclusions

From the presented findings, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- (i) The mean values of the responses of the students on the conduct of the academic staff relating to their professional competence and integrity, relations with their colleagues and students were below the average mean of 2.5 (based on the five-point likert scale research tool). This implies that the conduct of the academic staff was generally rated as being below par.
- (ii) Comparatively, mean measures of the responses of the learners show that the item on the lecturers' conduct relating to their professional competence and integrity that was ranked highest was on efforts they make to demonstrate devotion, academic soundness and competence in teaching. However, the nature of their dressing was rated lowest.
- (iii) As regards the lecturers' conduct towards their students, the mean measures of the learners' responses show that two items relating to their behaviour were rated highest; being caring, fair and committed to the best interests of their learners, as well as recognizing and respecting the uniqueness, individuality and specific needs of their students. However, their conduct in relation to striving to maintain high standards in monitoring, assessment and provision of feedback, as well as refraining from sexual abuse, mental and emotional harassment of their students received lowest rating.
- (iv) Comparatively, the conduct of the academic staff towards their colleagues relating to the aspect of not revealing confidential information or making false statements concerning them received highest number of favourable responses. However, the need for the academic staff to treat others with respect and dignity was given low rating.
- (v) The responses of both male and female learners on all characteristic elements of the conduct of the academic staff did not significantly differ except on the conduct relating to treatment of the academic staff of their colleagues with respect and dignity. More male students than female were of the view that the academic staff treat their colleagues with respect and dignity.
- (vi) Students who had been in the universities for a longer time (fifth year group) perceived their lecturers to be more devoted, academically sound and competent than the rest of lower levels.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made on the basis of the findings of this exploratory survey research:

- (i) There is need for universities to spearhead the establishment of a professional organization for academic staff in the universities to address issues relating to their conduct and obligations as educators.
- (ii) Other than the policies that guide the work of the academic staff, formulation and enforcement of a code of conduct would be worthwhile in regulating the conduct of the academic staff.
- (iii) Seminars and workshops need to be organized on a regular basis by the universities to sensitize the academic staff on matters of professional conduct.
- (iv) A more comprehensive survey that covers all universities in the country should be carried out to shed more light on this subject.

References

- Davis, M. (2002 a). *Profession, Code, and Ethics*. Burlington, Ashgate Publishers Ltd.
- Davis, M. (2002 b). *Ethics and the University*. London, Routledge Publishers.
- National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2015). *Code of Ethics*. Washington, NASW.
- Sidgwick, H. (2015). *The Methods of Ethics*. Cambridge, Harcket Publishing Company.
- Dobrin, A. (2002). *Ethics for Everyone: How to Increase Your Moral Intelligence*. Hoboken, John Wiley and Sons Publishers.