



Navigating the Ethical and Research Integrity Landscape in Botswana

– Part I

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Academic community, Africa, Botswana, postgraduate students, responsible conduct of research

Abstract

This study in two parts investigates research ethics and integrity among university students in Botswana, focusing on selected higher education institutions. Using a survey-based design and purposive sampling, the research assesses students' awareness, comprehension, compliance, and challenges regarding research ethics and integrity. Findings reveal a significant gap between knowledge and practice, indicating a need for training and support, supervision issues, ethical clearance challenges, resource limitations, and educational concerns. This first part depicts the review of literature and methodology; second part details the results and recommendations.

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1. Introduction

Ethics and integrity serve as the cornerstone principles underpinning academic research and the broader scientific community. For decades, it has become a predominant topic of discourse in the field of research management, administration and scientific enquiries. This discourse has received enormous attention in academia and in all aspects of life where research is concerned because of its importance in ensuring the credibility and truthfulness of research findings.

According to Akaranga and Ongong'a (2013), ethics refers to the moral rightness or wrongness of doing things. Researchers are professionals and are expected to adhere to a prescribed ethos when conducting research. In the context of research, Dahal and Rijal (2022) defined research ethics as the acceptance of moral obligations, integrity and social responsibility guarded by principles in every part of research activities.

Moreso, based on the definition captured in the mission statement of the World Conference on Research Integrity (2022), research integrity is “principles and standards intended to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of research.” Research integrity is essential to realising the societal value and benefits of research and is characterised by honesty, responsibility, professional courtesy, fairness, good stewardship, and adherence to established standards and guidelines. This characteristic feature makes the hallmark of good research practice.

Building on this foundation, research ethics and integrity are crucial within higher education institutions, where students actively participate in research endeavors as an integral component of their academic experience. Dhakal (2016) argued that it is of utmost importance to ensure that the pursuit of knowledge is conducted ethically, responsibly and with the highest standards of integrity.

Globally, recognition of research ethics and integrity came to the fore after World War II due to several historical and social factors. This period marked a turning point in the recognition of the need for ethical principles and principles in research activity. The need for research ethics and

integrity has been rooted in a combination of ethical violations, human rights concerns, scientific progress, public awareness, and the need for global standards. This recognition led to the creation of guidelines, regulations and ethical frameworks that still shape research practices worldwide today (University of Nevada, 2022; Akindele & Kerridge 2019).

Also in the African context, research ethics and integrity gained increased attention in the post-colonial era when African universities and research institutions began to understand the importance and necessity of upholding and promoting ethical principles in their research activities. Also, due to the interconnectedness of research activities and collaboration across the globe, adherence to ethical guidelines for research puts Africa on a better pedestal to engage in research activities on a global scale (Akindele & Kerridge 2019).

In response to the dearth of literature and proper documentation of the structure of research ethics and integrity in Botswana, this study examines the state of research ethics and integrity among university students in Africa, with a particular focus on selected Botswana higher education institutions (HEIs). By focusing on selected HEIs, this research explores the awareness, understanding, compliance and challenges related to research ethics and integrity and to contribute to the wider discourse on ethical research practices within the African academic environment. To achieve this aim, the study formulated three key objectives. First, to investigate the awareness, understanding and compliance of research integrity and ethical guidelines among university students in Botswana. Second, to identify the barriers to research integrity and ethical compliance among university students in Botswana and lastly, to formulate strategies for strengthening compliance with research ethics and integrity principles within the Botswana University context.

The findings of this study have the potential to guide educational institutions and inform policy development and stakeholders in designing strategies and interventions that promote a culture of ethical research conduct and integrity in the academic community. After a brief

introduction, the remainder of the first part of this paper is organised as follows: review of relevant literature and methodology; the authors present the results and discussion of findings, and finally conclusions and recommendations in the second part. The literature on research ethics is a key element of this study, it is therefore given plenty of space and divided into seven sections, starting by the conceptual definitions of ethics.

2. Review of Relevant Literature

Conceptual Definition of Ethics

Ethics, a field within philosophy, is concerned with human behavior and provides principles or guidelines for how individuals interact and relate to one another (Kovacs, 1991). It refers to a “way of life” or a set of “social norms for conduct” that distinguish acceptable from unacceptable actions (Ongong & Akaranga, 2013). While legal rules define behavior in many societies, moral norms encompass a broader scope than legal frameworks. However, societies use law to enforce moral principles. The pursuit of ethics contributes to the establishment of social norms that govern expected behavior under certain circumstances. These behavioral norms encompass a spectrum of moral perspectives, influencing moral decision-making (Saunders & Thornhill, 2011). Moral values are gradually established in an individual's life and shaped by their interactions in the community. Therefore, moral standards are understood differently among individuals (Resnick, 2011). Norms can be imbibed from early life experiences, including upbringing at home, education in schools, and participation in religious learning settings such as Sunday schools or madrassas.

Research Ethics and Integrity

On one hand, research ethics constitutes an applied manifestation of moral responsibilities, integrity, and social obligations that are regulated by established codes of conduct at all stages of responsible research (Dahal & Rijal, 2022; Dhakal, 2016). This concept includes two distinct dimensions: “procedural ethics” and “ethics in practice” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Procedural ethics includes standardized procedures for

planning and conducting responsible research, while ethics in practice refers to the ethical considerations encountered in the day-to-day actions of researchers (Resnik & Stewart, 2012). Alignment of ethical standards and moral values in researchers leads to reliable research, while any degradation in these aspects results in research misconduct. Such misconduct can ultimately undermine the integrity of knowledge, leading to unsafe decisions and actions that can harm society, the environment, and research participants (Resnik & Stewart, 2012).

On the other hand, research integrity includes the ethical principles, values, and standards that guide the conduct of research endeavors. It means a commitment to honesty, transparency, fairness and responsible practices throughout the research process, from conceptualization to dissemination. Research integrity ensures that research is conducted with the utmost honesty, accuracy and ethical consideration, thereby maintaining the credibility, reliability and societal value of research findings.

Philosophical Approaches of Research Ethics and Integrity

Research ethics, as an applied ethical discipline, is influenced by various philosophical approaches that underpin moral and ethical considerations in research conduct. These approaches play a crucial role in our daily research tasks and require researchers to protect the dignity of their subjects while accurately disseminating researched information (Fouka & Mantzorou, 2011). Two prominent philosophical perspectives regarding research ethics and integrity are utilitarianism and deontology (Lin & Blumberg, 2018). Utilitarianism, a teleological perspective, holds that the results obtained by research justify the methods employed. Under this view, researchers weigh the potential benefits and drawbacks of their actions, trying to maximize overall utility or happiness. However, this approach involves a balance between potential research progress and ethical considerations to minimize harm, fraud or exploitation (Ovkah & Aswani, 2011).

In contrast, deontological principles assert that research results can never justify unethical means. This view emphasizes adherence to moral principles,

rules, and duties, focusing on the rightness or wrongness of actions rather than their consequences (Ovkah & Aswani, 2011). Researchers embracing deontology prioritize their ethical obligations and responsibilities, emphasizing the importance of maintaining honesty, transparency, and responsible behavior throughout research even at the expense of potential benefits. This approach maintains that an action can be morally right without promoting a greater balance of good over evil. Consequently, fraud is incompatible with ensuring the validity and reliability of data.

Theories of Research Ethics and Integrity

In understanding the reasons behind unethical research conduct, this discussion briefly examines the “bad apple theory” and the “stressful or imperfect environment theory.” The saying “one apple spoils the whole bunch” is derived from the 14th century Latin proverb “the rotten apple hurts its neighbors” (Shah, 2011). This idiosyncratic concept underlies the “bad apple theory”, while most researchers adhere to high ethical standards, some may exhibit ethical lapses. In contrast, “stressful or imperfect environment theory” argues that organizations face a variety of pressures, incentives, and career aspirations that may force researchers to deviate from ethical standards and engage in misconduct. For example, in academic institutions, faculty members may collaborate with colleagues or students to fulfill publication requirements for promotion or academic degrees. This may inadvertently result in patterns of misbehavior (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003).

Ethical Issues Related to Research

Norms play a pivotal role in research, facilitating knowledge dissemination, truthful reporting, and error correction. From research proposal development to data collection, analysis, and presentation, researchers are obligated to uphold values throughout the research process. Failure to do so can result in research misconduct. Researchers must exercise discretion when sharing research findings if doing so could negatively impact their sponsor's relations. This is particularly relevant if the findings concern an organization's policies or sensitive matters. Collaboration with fellow researchers should ensure mutual respect for intellectual property rights. Neglecting this can lead to

conflicts or protests. Within this framework, this paper examines inherent ethical issues.

- Academic Freedom: Academics are expected to freely share information and ideas while safeguarding intellectual property (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). Fabrication, falsification, and fraud Fabrication involves creating false data or results and recording or reporting them, while falsification or fraud involves manipulating materials, equipment, or processes to alter results or omit data, compromising the integrity of the research (Kaur, 2014). These practices breach the fundamental tenets of research ethics, undermining the trustworthiness of researchers and potentially misleading scholars. Such actions, often driven by misuse of power, may exploit the vulnerable subjects (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003).
- Financial Issues and Sponsorship: Research is a meticulous and rigorous endeavor that demands thorough presentation and analysis. Researchers are accountable to the public and should seek financial support and sponsorship to conduct comprehensive research. However, funding constraints or sponsor demands can compromise the quality of the study, leading to rushed research and skewed findings (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). Such studies could be a waste of money or is of no value or impact on the consumers. Some research studies are even conducted under the guidance of a sponsor/s who specifies their needs or demands. In one way, this could lead to non-compliance or non-conformity.
- Plagiarism: The issue of plagiarism is an important issue in educational institutions of higher education. This is a practice where the author or researcher must ensure that any written work is original and devoid of any texts, results or even expressions that are borrowed, manipulated or even used ideas, processes, results or even words. author or publication without indicating where the information is obtained (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003; Kaur, 2014). This neglect has become necessary due to the advancement of information communication technology (ICT) in contemporary society (Saunders & Thornhill, 2011). The most common aspects of

plagiarism can be found in introductory pages such as introductions and literature reviews. This can be attributed to laziness, ignorance or cultural diversity, which affects the integrity of the researcher. It is the responsibility of the author to properly cite the original material. Two forms of plagiarism include “self-plagiarism”, or “multiple duplication” also known as “salami”. This is a situation where the same material is reported in two or more publications. Another form of plagiarism is “redundant publication”, which occurs when a researcher reuses their previous work in another research without properly referencing the previous work, or when some information that has already been published is republished, but more is added new data. pp. Perhaps the researcher's intention is to emphasize the conclusions already made. But that certainly interferes with the analysis of the research and violates copyright.

Research Integrity Concern

In the context of research integrity, ensuring objectivity and impartiality is very important. As defined by the World Conferences on Research Integrity, research integrity (RI) includes principles and standards designed to validate and establish reliability of research output. RIs play a vital role in realizing the social value and benefits of research activities. Consistent and continuous adherence to RI principles such as integrity, accountability, professional courtesy, fairness, and responsible stewardship are admirable characteristics of research practice (WCRI, 2022).

Historically, RI promotion movements have focused primarily on practices and actions that undermine the integrity and validity of research projects at the intrinsic or internal level, often referred to as the “micro” or “meso” level. These include a variety of violations, including disregarding conflicts of interest, unacceptable manipulation of data, and lack of due diligence.

In addition, the promotion of RI should be expanded to address systemic practices at a broader “macro” level. If left unchecked, these practices can negatively impact the project or conduct at the “meso/micro” level, ultimately undermining RI. For example, practices that perpetuate power imbalances in

collaborative research can create the foundations for a fertile environment in which resentment, factionalism, and harmful research practices take root among researchers. In particular, the Bridging Research Integrity and Global Health Epidemiology (BRIDGE) guidelines highlight the detrimental effects of research collaboration dysfunction in RI (Alba et al., 2020).

The EU definition of RI includes four dimensions: honesty, reliability, accountability, and respect. The dimension of respect should include the recognition of existing inequalities and the commitment to correct them (Horn et al., 2022). In a more equitable research environment, the opinions of stakeholders and knowledge holders are respected in collaborative research, resulting in higher quality results. Therefore, addressing this issue yields findings and results that are not only more reliable, but also more applicable to the development of practical tools and policy change. The TRUST project also links unfair practices in research collaboration to the erosion of ethical behavior and indirectly fosters an environment for harmful research practices (DRP) (Schroeder et al., 2019).

In summary, research ethics and integrity involve the application of ethical principles and standards to ensure responsible research. It is based on a variety of philosophical approaches and addresses the ethical dilemmas of collaboration, academic freedom, forgery, falsification, sponsorship, and plagiarism that affect the ethical integrity of research.

Empirical Review of Research Ethics and Integrity Concerns

Studies have indicated that over the years universities across the globe have faced challenges in establishing research ethics support structures even though they have proved to be essential if universities are to ensure that student research is ethically sound (Huang et al., 2021; Makhoul et al., 2014; Mamotte and Wassenaar, 2009). Among those structures is the lack of intentional research ethics capacity building interventions (Mazonde, Sugarman, Maletle 2007; Petillion, Melrose, Moore, & Nuttgens 2017; Huang et al., 2021) that ensure that students understand research to be more than just an intellectual undertaking but also involves a thought process of who they

conduct research from, how we do it, how we protect research participants and most importantly how they share results of their studies.

Most studies indicate that there is an assumption that studying research ethics within a research module is sufficient and this guess has proved to be wrong in most cases (Petillion et al, 2007; Tammeleht, Löfström & Rodriguez-Triana, 2022; Anu Tammeleht & Erika Löfström, 2023). The lack of ethics education has therefore over the years led to limited research and integrity competencies and awareness among research students. It is due to this shortcoming that there is a wide range of literature points to varied perceptions on the importance of research ethics and integrity and its application on research. So, this section of the paper makes critical analysis of studies on the competencies, experiences with navigating the research ethics space to assess the current state of African students on the matter.

A study by Petillion et al (2007) explored master's and doctoral students' knowledge and perceptions of research ethics principles and describe their experiences with applying them in research practice and revealed that students were taught about research ethics and integrity in their research methods module and as such they lack in-depth knowledge on ethical considerations. The study further suggests that universities should regularly conduct needs assessments and evaluate the state of research to inform the development of research ethics curricula, ensuring that they are tailored to address current needs effectively.

Similarly, Rissanen and Löfström (2014) in their study that investigated the teaching of research ethics, have found the same challenge and recommended for a curriculum that foster reflective researchers who consider research-related decisions in light of pragmatic, philosophical, ethical, and moral perspectives encompassing all aspects in the research process. Following these challenges of capacity, there is an emerging body of knowledge that looks into strategies of developing research ethics competencies among students (Tammeleht et al., 2022). For example, Tammeleht et al (2022) have contributed strategies that can be employed in developing research ethics and integrity competencies. They propose that a collaborative case-based roleplay is crucial in training students as it is more learner centered. Van den Hoven et

al (2023) also advocates for constructive based training as the training needs may differ from one group to another but still share the same intended training impact and objectives. They made emphasis that different training methods and objectives can be employed to cater for the needs of different groups of students. It can be deduced from these studies that course design and course evaluation must be a norm to enable mutual needs-based learning. The central argument put forward by Tammeleht et al (2022) is that research ethics and integrity (RI) educators/trainers should not only focus content knowledge about RI but also pedagogical knowledge because a single approach to RI education to cater for the different groups of students and disciplines. It is therefore also important to note that these studies imply that different students within a given university will have different understanding, experiences, and application of RI in their research.

Huang and Wang (2023) in a study that examined 463 Chinese social sciences graduate students revealed that they understood both ethical responsibilities as researchers and are aware of research ethics and integrity. This finding is also consistent with those of Huang et al (2021) who observed the same. However, Huang and Wang (2023) in the same study argue that though students demonstrate this awareness they do not demonstrate deep understanding of the RI, hence, research ethics and integrity education remains a necessity. Studies that gauge the status of research ethics and integrity in universities also investigate whether students perceive it to be important. Students are believed to perceive ethical reviews as important as it helps in protecting themselves and the rights of the participants (Koepsell et al., 2014; Huang et al., 2021). Finally, Huang et al (2021) has also found out that, students identified best ways to promote research ethics education for social sciences graduate students in Chinese universities. For example, they suggested that ethics reviews be made mandatory for research studies including human subjects, furthermore, graduate research methodology courses must include research ethics topics and materials.

Though evidence from studies note the need for ethics education and structures that support ethics application processes it is worth pointing out that most of this literature does not come from Africa where there is limited literature on student experiences of research ethics and integrity (Petillion et

al., 2023; Mokola et al., 2023). However, Mokola et al (2023) interviewed South African students on their experiences on ethics and came up with different perspectives. Like other studies in and outside the African context, ethics education was emphasized by the students as important. Contrary to this finding on the need and lack of ethics training offered for the students, there are some studies that have found out that student's ignorance on the available training make them miss the exposure to such trainings (Kouritzin & Nkagawa, 2018; Hofmann & Holm, 2019). Another source of training that is believed to facilitate students' understanding of research ethics is through the support and guidance of their supervisors. Some studies have opposed this notion as they confirmed that though supervisors are expected to do this, there is very limited support from supervisors (Ntoyanto-Tyatyantsi, 2023). Evidence from the reviewed literature points to the need for universities to consider ways of putting in place structures and systems that ensure that research is carried out in a way that protects both the researchers and the participants.

3. Methodology

This study is set in Botswana. The African context is scant of literature relative to the state of research ethics and integrity in the Higher education space. Mouton (2012) characterised research methodology as the comprehensive process that guides a study, encompassing all phases from identifying and analysing the research problem to the final stages of data analysis, interpretation, and formulation of conclusions and recommendations. He also emphasised that research methodologies reflect the fundamental principles that influence the researcher's choice of a specific approach for conducting the study. Similarly, Neuman (2011) defined research design as the overarching framework used to address the research questions and manage challenges encountered during the research process. Researchers have a variety of possible designs to choose from, depending on the nature of their study. According to Hofstee (2006), commonly employed designs include extended literature reviews, comparative analysis, content analysis, survey-based research, evaluative studies, case studies, action research, and hypothesis development.

This study adopted a survey-based research design. In this approach, information is collected from individuals who are considered knowledgeable about the topic and are willing to provide the required data. These individuals are selected to represent a broader population, ensuring that the findings can be generalised. The data was obtained through a well-structured online questionnaire. For reliability and validity purposes, the questionnaires were pretested and piloted with ten (10) post graduate students representing the target population who were not included in the final sample. This process resulted in minor changes to items wording and questionnaire structure. A concern in getting data from postgraduate students from major Universities in Botswana is adequate response and representative rate. To mitigate this issue, we relied on collaboration with key stakeholders in the postgraduate space across major universities in Botswana to facilitate increased post-graduate student reachability, participation, and response rate.

The study population included all the registered higher education institutions in Botswana. The study sample comprised of the top six out of ten registered universities in Botswana as a representation of the Higher education landscape in the Country. This study adopted purposive sampling methods to obtain data from respondents who were deemed knowledgeable about the subject matter. To mitigate bias, we introduced certain criteria in selecting potential respondents such as respondents must have completed a post graduate study within the past five years in a Botswana University or respondents is currently registered for a post graduate program in one of the Universities in Botswana, and respondents must have completed the proposal phase of their studies and gone through the stage of ethical clearance process of their studies. These criteria were included in obtaining data from prospective respondents to ensure the respondents have adequate knowledge, experience, and exposure within the context of the study.

A total of 200 post graduate students were contacted through their universities post graduate department. Following the initial contact, instructions to complete the online survey and a consent letter were sent on the 21st of August 2023. The survey remained open until September 20th, 2023, during which time three reminder emails were sent to those yet to respond. Of the 85 that started the survey on the first week, 140 completed the survey.

Five completed responses did not meet our selection criteria. This resulted in a usable sample of 135 for data analysis, representing a 65% response rate.

According to Spekle and Widerner (2018), to minimise the potential for common method bias in survey-based research design, careful questionnaire design and implementation must be sought and adhered to. Hence, we varied the number of response categories, types of anchors and included reverse worded items in the questionnaire to reduce bias.

In compliance with research ethics and integrity guidelines, the identity of the participants were not recorded to provide anonymity, and their information was kept confidential throughout the process. Data collected was stored away in a password protected folder on the computer of the investigators. Also, their consent was sorted and participation in filling in the questionnaires were made completely voluntary. The data collected from the online questionnaire was analysed, summarised, and interpreted accordingly. The study used SPSS 29 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) for a detailed descriptive analysis of the respondents' perceptions of research ethics and integrity and applied thematic analysis to capture the strategies for enhancing compliance with research ethics and integrity principles.

[Editor Note: Part II is to be discovered in the following article]

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5. Short biography

Dr. Ayodeji Michael Obadire is the Portfolio Manager for Research and Innovation at Botswana Accountancy College, where he oversees research and innovation initiatives, fostering a culture of research excellence within the College. He holds a PhD in Finance and Accounting from the University of Venda, South Africa. He is equally a qualified Chartered Accountant (CA), Chartered Management Accountant (CIMA), Chartered Global Management Accountant (CGMA), and Certified Professional Accountant (CPA).

Dr. Changu Batisani is the Research Coordinator at the Botswana Open University. She holds a M.Ed (Monitoring and Evaluation) from University of Botswana, Msc (Strategic Management) from University of Derby UK, and a PhD in Educational Leadership and Policy from University of Witwatersrand.

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