

Ethical Concerns in University Research in Uganda

By Dr. Gladys Muhama*

Lecturer, Uganda Management Institute

*Corresponding author: Dr. Gladys Muhama, Address: School of Business and Management, P.O. Box 20131, Kampala. Tel:+256 782-266499; Email: muhamagladys@yahoo.co.uk

Citation: Muhama G (2026) Ethical Concerns in University Research in Uganda. *Int J Teach Learn Sci-IJTLS*: e146.

Received Date: 18 March, 2026; Accepted Date: 31 March, 2026; Published Date: 06 April, 2026

Abstract

This study explores the degree to which researchers in Ugandan universities adhere to research ethics. Existing literature is mainly on research policies, procedures, directives, and guidelines with little empirical data on the adherence of researchers including university based ones to the general principles of research ethics. The study adopted a multiple case study design to explore ethical and integrity research issues in Ugandan private and public universities. More specifically, the study sought to explore how Ugandan universities have ensured ethical issues among the researchers at all levels of research activities. The researcher interviewed 25 respondents including 5 heads of research centers, 10 research supervisors and 10 research students from five (5) private and public universities in Uganda who had participated in research works and or clearance of researchers. The research questions and discussions aimed to broadly explore ethical issues and the strengths and weaknesses of universities in ensuring ethics in scientific research activities. The study established the existence of ethical challenges regarding methodological transparency and responsibility as well as integrity and honesty on the part of researchers, supervisors, and research students in research activities. The study discusses the positive and negative aspects of research ethics and the policy and managerial implications of enforcing research ethics and integrity to protect university researchers and research participants. The paper proposes that universities need to enforce research ethics by paying attention to harmful practices that negatively impact the research process and outcomes and ultimately damage the image of universities as centres of research.

Keywords: Research ethics and integrity, research ethical dilemmas, Ugandan universities.

1. Introduction and background

Agwor and Osho, (2017) [1] and Ezigbo, (2009) [2] view ethics as a set of moral principles of conduct used to govern the decision making behaviour of an individual or a group of individuals. The scholars assert that such principles guide individuals in their dealings with other individuals or groups, and provide a basis for deciding whether behaviour is right and wrong. The same principles also help people determine moral responses to situations in which the best course of action is unclear. The authors conclude that as a discipline, ethics is the study of moral principles or values that determine whether actions are right or wrong and outcomes are good or bad. In the world of research, scholars, like Creswell (2007) [3], opine that researchers in social and behavioural science need to look forward to the ethical issues that might come up during all the stages of the research journey, for instance, in the identification of the research problem to be investigated, in reviewing of related literature, in determining the research methods to guide the research process, in the breakdown of the data, and in the writing, publication and dissemination of the findings.

In the identification of these ethical issues in the research journey, university research supervisors need to guide their student researchers and equip them with knowledge and skills of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in the research world [4]. Given that socio-scientific research entails gathering data from people and about people, applicable moral principles must be observed. These principles require that research students and supervisors seek permission to do research from regulatory authorities, obtain informed consent from research participants, protect participants from possible harm, acquire data correctly, guard against anomalies or misconduct that might implicate the organizations and deal with predicaments that arise

during the research journey. Scholars such as [5,6,7] note that whether a given research project is qualitative, quantitative, or both, it needs to anticipate ethical issues, and aggressively attend to them in its design and implementation [8] and [9], assert that ethical compliance in research is very important if we are to conduct research that generates appropriate solutions to research problems [8] and [9] emphasize that research ethics encompasses a wide range of principles including honesty, objectivity, integrity, care, openness, and respect for intellectual property. The same scholars further note that research ethics also protect the rights and well-being of human and animal subjects. Research ethics encompass several key categories like protecting human subjects, ensuring animal welfare, maintaining scientific integrity, upholding institutional integrity, and promoting social responsibility. These principles guide researchers in conducting ethical research and addressing potential conflicts or concerns. Other scholars, such as [7,10,11] note that research ethics may address various issues. For example, procedural ethics considers the formal rules, regulations, and approval processes that govern ethical conduct in research and other fields, and emphasizes the importance of upholding ethical principles, like beneficence, respect, and justice, through established guidelines and procedures. The same scholars also consider normative ethics, which focuses on the content or "what" of ethical decision making, rather than just the procedures or "how" it deals with defining what is good or right behavior, and identifying the fundamental moral principles that should guide actions and decisions.

Research ethics pertains to adherence to codes of conduct and guidelines especially regarding the protection of research participants as well as methodological objectivity, transparency, and responsibility [12]. In all there are over ten principles of

research ethics and they include informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, honesty, integrity, and objectivity. Others are care, openness, beneficence, justice, respect for intellectual property rights, and non-maleficence [13]. Adhering to standards of research ethics is a prerequisite for good scientific research. Values, such as honesty and transparency, underpin general, prevailing research norms, and they are central to ensuring mutual trust between research participants and the researchers. Ethical research underpins the epistemic goals of scientific research, and shared norms are a prerequisite to a successful research activity as they provide a basis for ethical conduct and enable cooperation among researchers. This study sought to explore research ethical practices in Ugandan universities.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite increased awareness of ethical lapses or shortcomings in Ugandan university research on the part of students and supervisors, university research ethical committees have not done much to address these ethical issues [12]. This problem has not only greatly undermined the quality of research, but also exposed the failure of university research ethical committees to uphold ethical standards, to the detriment of the image of their respective institutions [12]. This problem has left most student researchers incapable of observing the principles of ethical research, and merely copying and pasting, ultimately failing to solve their research problems. This study set out to explore research ethical practices in Ugandan universities and share the experiences of both supervisors, supervisees and ethical committee members.

Literature

Fox and Busher, (2022) [14] note that educational research focuses mainly on learning, learners and relationships between learners, educators and organizational leaders, and the effect of people's social and cultural backgrounds and contexts on those relationships. This involves researchers considering critically the power imbalances in these relationships, and finding ways to hear and compare the different voices and perspectives of the participants in these relationships in their particular local and national contexts by using face-to-face and/or online/virtual methods [14] further contend that ethics committees, whether national, regional or institutional, exist to regulate research activities, and they are intended to help researchers to protect and benefit learners and other participants in research, ensuring that the vulnerabilities or potential of the learners and participants are accommodated in the design and conduct of research. However, [14] note that the central role of research ethics committees, as gatekeepers, can be a barrier to educational research which might maximise the benefits to participants, including their sense of inclusivity.

These barriers can be traced to the agendas, accountabilities, values and ethical perspectives that drive the work of these committees. For their part, [15] assert that universities tend to assume that widely accepted views of ethical research are based more or less on a set of rational hypothetico-deductive principles, sometimes referred to as a Utilitarian Ethical Framework (UEF). One of these principles, beneficence, was originally developed to underpin ethical bio-medical studies, and it proposes that research should be carried out with beneficence, meaning that research should seek to benefit both respondents and the researcher. Another of the principles, non-maleficence, requires that research should at all times avoid harm to participants, including those involved in a study and those that the study may encounter. This assures participants that

they will receive fair treatment, and that the researcher will be held accountable for what happens to them [7].

Clark-Kazak, (2017) [16] also observes that collaboration can be extended between researchers and their supervisees [17] also observes that research ethical committees could aspire to developing a community of practice between themselves and researchers. However experienced or inexperienced the researchers engaging with research ethical committees may be, they should be invited to make positive contributions to decision making in the research community. This would help in countering the asymmetrical power relationships between researchers and research ethical committees, and recognise the application of values arising from their particular socio-political contexts [16] advises that inexperienced researchers can avoid feeling disempowered by being supported, formally and informally, by more experienced researchers, helping them to learn how to pursue their aspirations for research in ways which are acceptable to the system in which they are located [18] for his part suggests that to further adapt the system to create a more dialogic process could include opportunities for researchers to be present when applications are discussed. This could be either at a full meeting of an ethical research committee or with a sub-group of its reviewers; and it would help less-experienced researchers to understand how decisions are made about their project proposals while creating a greater sense of collective possibility for them. It would also acknowledge the importance of researchers' relationships with their participants and their projects' contexts and recognise that every researcher brings valid and valuable insights to discussions about ethical decision-making for research projects.

However, according to [19] inexperienced researchers develop unique expertise through building personal relationships within their research context and awareness of that context. Hearing about perspectives from settings not necessarily directly experienced by researchers on ethical research committees might cause these more experienced researchers to reflect on their own prejudices about research methods and designs and the claimed risks associated with them at the institutional and personal levels [19,13] observe that if open dialogue results, bringing together the combined expertise into productive discussion, power inequalities in research settings might be identified and practical mitigation measures considered as to how researchers might avoid silencing voices inadvertently. This could help researchers to anticipate the risks of intervening in particular contexts with certain participants, ponder why they are thinking about conducting research at all in particular contexts, and what it might contribute to the local as well as international communities [20]. As [21] argue, such reflexive engagement with other professionals is important for researchers to demonstrate phronesis. This would go beyond the rational, logical and expected towards guidance for ethical practice which takes into account values to help guide the means and ends. In such a dialogic approach to ethical decision making, decisions made by an ethical research committee would include the views of participants, gatekeepers and stakeholders by enabling researchers to 'see like a subject'. This approach acknowledges people's subjectivities as relevant to ethical decision-making about research projects throughout their lives. However, to enact this approach an ethical research committee would need to create spaces for such consultation throughout the life of a project, and to modify their documentation to include this wider range of consultation, both internally for the ethical

research committee's institution and externally for the people in the research setting.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a multiple case study design to explore issues of research ethics in Ugandan universities. A multiple case study design, was meant to offset the disadvantages of a single case study. The researcher interviewed 25 respondents, including 5 heads of research centers, 10 research supervisors, and 10 research students, from five (5) private and public universities in Uganda, who had participated in research works and/or clearance of researchers. The five public and private universities involved in the study were: Busitema University (BUS), Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU), Makerere University (MAK), Uganda Christian University (UCU), and Uganda Martyrs University (UMU). The study population comprised of purposively selected research students, who had completed their dissertation in the previous one year, supervisors who had supervised for at least 10 years, and members of research ethical committees, who had served on the committee for the previous two years.

Interviews were employed to draw data from the 25 respondents, and secondary data was gathered through document review. Each interview lasted at least 35 minutes, and the interview sessions were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The research questions and discussions aimed to broadly explore ethical issues, strengths, and weaknesses of universities in ensuring ethical scientific research. The data were qualitatively analyzed to generate themes and categories. According to Magwa and Magwa (2015) [22], qualitative research involves the researcher socially constructing reality in a natural setting, in a systematic, interactive approach which is best for gathering feelings, attitudes and values, with superior results, because of its multiple realities where each individual is able to produce his/her reality. Content and thematic analyses were conducted, and the results are presented in narrative form, including quotations. For ethical reasons, the names of the participants were not disclosed although the names of their respective universities were:

4. Results

Six factors were found to adversely influence research and ethics included: inadequate support to both research supervisors and student researchers, inadequate research knowledge and experience, excessive supervisory workload, absence of rigorous procedures to monitor and evaluate research ethics, insufficient for the research activities, failure to prioritize research as an area of specialization. Results from the research supervisors indicated that, in the initial stages of research, most research students are weak in conducting exploitative research, and they conceive research problems or issues for investigation which do not benefit the respondents or the individuals being studied, thereby contravening the ethical principle of beneficence. Ethically, the problem should be meaningful to the participants and respondents under investigation, and not to the researcher alone. In a nut shell, it would be very unethical to sample the opinions of people on an issue whose outcome would not be meaningful or beneficial to them. On probing the students on this issue, it emerged that, in the initial stages of research, most lacked support from their supervisors.

Another ethical issue that was identified was students deliberately not informing respondents of the purpose of their respective studies, and simply collecting data, or concealing the purpose of their research and misrepresenting it, which is

deceitful and unethical. Students in the study also revealed that they encounter challenges with the supervisors who force them to change their research topics to suit the interests of the supervisor at the expense of those of the student. Yet another ethical issue revealed was students' failure to acknowledge their indebtedness to published authors whose ideas they may have used, which contravenes the ethical principles of honesty and respect for intellectual property rights. Expressing disappointment with most students' research work, one supervisor said, "... it is very disappointing to note that some students are so unethical as to submit other researchers' work, word-for-word, or to submit a genetic copy as if it were one's own work".

The students further revealed that most of their supervisors did not guide them regarding how to review literature and cite sources, areas in which they confessed incompetence in spite of their having taken and passed a course in research methods. In addition, most students complained of their supervisors not devoting enough time to supervision on account of their busy schedules. Similar ethical issues were the acts of recycling one owns work in different publications or the act of borrowing generously from one's own previous work without acknowledgement, which is tantamount to self-plagiarism.

The study also unearthed the unethical behaviour on the part of students who concoct data, and fraudulently claim to have collected it from particular respondents at a given study site. One supervisor indicated that a good number of student researchers had been guilty of this vice, and had produced data, without actually collecting data or using the tools designed for the study. Other students were reported to have made use of data previously used by earlier researchers. Such acts erode the integrity of both the research and the researcher.

Data from members of research ethical committees who are in charge of permitting students to collect data, reveals that, in most cases, research ethical committees monitor and evaluate research activities with laxity and insufficient rigor, which enhances unethical student behavior, such as concocting data. As a student disclosed, *"... at this rate, and in this era of scarcity of supervisors, given the excessively large number of students per supervisor, after successfully defending their research proposals, which is always done very late when the deadlines for submitting the dissertation are approaching, students are tempted to concoct data."*

Other unethical practices reported by an ethical committee member was failure of some students to secure the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents, which may end up putting the respondents at risk. For example, one respondent was reported to have disclosed his plight to a member of research ethical committee, saying, *"... I lost my job as an accountant because one of the student researchers, whose name I will not mention, sought information from me, promising to keep the source of the information confidential, but to my surprise, he disclosed all the information I gave him to my employers, and my name was cited having disclosed this information, which put me at loggerheads with my employers, and I was eventually dismissed"*.

Interview results from some student researchers also revealed some unethical behaviours on the part of supervisors. For example, some students reported that, during data collection, some supervisors ask their students for data sets, and use the data to generate their own publications. This was confirmed by an

ethical committee member who reported that such cases had been reported to their committee, and some supervisors had subsequently been disciplined. Such acts of dishonesty and lack of integrity in research activities have not only put public and private universities into disrepute, they have also greatly compromised the quality of university research in Uganda.

The study also found that the use of words that connote bias or hatred for other people, and the fabrication and alteration of findings to suit a researcher's interest, are common, especially in social science research work, which is ethically unacceptable in academia. Deeper investigations in this issue revealed that such acts have been encouraged by a general lack of values among research students and supervisors who fail to guide students appropriately, or who lack integrity. For example, one student reported, "I fabricated findings, but when my supervisor put me to task, I gave him money, and he rested the case"

The study also found that there are ethical lapses in research publication as well. For example, it was observed that some journals publish research papers, without having subjected them to peer review, which contravenes the ethical principles of honesty and integrity. It was also found that the unethical practices of 'gift authorship' and 'ghost authorship' are common. While gift authorship consists authors allowing their friends to be their co-authors without participating in the research, 'ghost authorship' is the practice of including many unknown authors in particular research who did not participate in this research for personal gains.

Corruption and nepotism tendencies were also reported, and they include cases where some researchers have been accorded ethical clearance in exchange for financial rewards or on the basis of being a relative to a member of an ethical clearance committee. This has adversely affected research processes and activities.

5. Discussions

The study exposed an assemblage of ethical challenges in research activities as research students endeavour to fulfil the research component of the requirements for qualifying for academic awards. The challenges occur right from the stage of identifying a research problem to the tail end of disseminating research results. The unethical issues identified included: conducting exploitative research, this involved researchers identifying research problems which are benefiting their own personal interests, without considering the interests of the respondents, which contravenes the ethical principles of beneficence and justice. This finding corroborates the views of [23] who assert that any research project whose end results are intended to benefit only the researcher's personal interests are ethically unacceptable, and that for research to be ethically viable and meaningful, its results must be intended to solve a general problem to benefit various stakeholders in the research. Another ethical challenge that was identified was the intentional concealment, or misrepresentation, of the purpose of a study when seeking informed consent from potential respondents, which leads respondents to agree to participate as a result of being inadequately informed or simply misinformed. This contravenes the ethical principle of honesty, and the finding agrees with the views of [24] who observed that some researchers conduct research in a deceitful manner which renders the research process unethical.

Yet another ethical challenge identified was the failure on the part of many student researchers, especially in the social sciences, to acknowledge indebtedness to other researchers for the use of their ideas, and pretending to be the originator of the ideas, which contravenes the ethical principle of respect for other people's intellectual property rights. Concocting data, and pretending to have collected it during a study, is another unethical practice that was identified among university student researchers. These findings corroborate the views of [25] who indicated that manufactured data was rampant and had diluted the quality of research in most universities in sub-Saharan Africa.

Other ethical challenges reported included the failure of some student researchers to secure the anonymity and confidentiality of respondents, and the fabrication or alteration of findings to suit a researcher's interests. Failure to secure the anonymity and confidentiality of respondents, causes problems to respondents who sacrifice their time to give researchers information, and it contravenes the ethical principles of anonymity and confidentiality. Similarly, the fabrication or alteration of findings contravenes the ethical principle of honesty.

The study established further that some of these unethical practices are attributable to some universities not remunerating student-research supervisors adequately or at all, and peer-reviewers of papers doing shoddy work, which compromises the quality of research and the reputation of the institutions.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This study has established that university research in Uganda is beset with a number of ethical challenges. These challenges include the contravention of the ethical principle of beneficence; the concealment and misrepresentation of research purposes for personal interests, which is deceitful and unethical; and the practice of supervisors forcing students to change their research topics to suit their own interests.

Other challenges include the failure of student researchers to acknowledge their indebtedness to published authors whose ideas they have used, thereby contravening the principles of honesty and respect for intellectual property rights; self-plagiarism, which involves recycling one's own work in different publications or reusing previous work without acknowledgment; and the fabrication of data, as well as falsely claiming to have collected it from specific respondents at designated study sites.

Additional unethical practices identified include the failure to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of respondents; the use of other researchers' data by supervisors to produce independent publications; the practices of gift authorship and ghost authorship; and the granting of ethical clearance in exchange for financial rewards or on the basis of personal relationships. Furthermore, there is a high degree of laxity and a lack of robust monitoring mechanisms within research ethics committees to effectively oversee research activities.

In view of these findings, this paper recommends that universities strengthen measures to guard against misconduct and impropriety that may damage institutional integrity. Research ethics committees should be reinforced to address emerging challenges and to ensure that loopholes in research processes are identified and addressed in a timely manner. Additionally, ethical considerations should be integrated across all stages of the research process, particularly within higher learning institutions, where academic professionals are expected

to uphold and promote a strong ethical foundation in research practices.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the constructive comments from the participants of the NEMRA Conference that took place on 2nd July 2025 for their comments, when this paper was first presented. The author also acknowledges the constructive and insightful suggestions of the Editor of IJTLS for reviewing the paper. I would like to express gratitude to Dr. Ferdinand Kaddu-Mukasa, the critical reviewer of this paper, Dr. Mshilla Maghanga also a critical reviewer, Mr. James Isabirye & Eng. Kajura Prince Victor Otim for their support towards this work and all the interviewees for giving their views and time to this research.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper

Contribution

This paper was authored by one author but she acknowledges all the scholars in this research area whose works have been cited in the effort of contributing to the body of knowledge

Sources of Funding

The author declares that this study was self-funded in terms of paper development, data collection and analysis

References

1. Agwor, T. C., & Osho, A. A. (2017). Empirical reflection on business ethics and entrepreneurial success in SMEs in Rivers State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Advance Engineering and Management Research*, 2(6), 1956–1965.
2. Ezigbo, C. A. (2009). Ethics: The challenges of definition and enforcement. *Nigeria Academy of Management Journal*, 2(2), 47–53.
3. Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach* (3rd ed.). Sage.
4. Maicibi, N. A. & Kaahwa, Y. (Eds.). (2004). *Graduate studies supervision at Makerere University: A Book of Readings*. Kampala: Netmedia Publishers.
5. Berg, B. (2001). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. Allyn & Bacon.
6. Punch, K.E (2005). *Introduction to social research; quantitative and qualitative approaches*. 2nd ed. London: sage
7. Sieber, J. E. (1998). Planning ethically responsible research. In L. Bickman & D. J. Rog (Eds.), *Handbook of applied social research methods* (pp. 127-156). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. APA, 2001, Publication Manual.
8. Fox, A., Baker, S., Charitonos, K., Jack, V., & Moser-Mercer, B. (2020). Ethics-in-practice in fragile contexts. *British Educational Research Journal*, 46, 829–847. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3618>
9. Hugman, R., Bartolomei, L., & Pittaway, E. (2011). Human agency and informed consent. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 24(4), 655–671.
10. Ssenyonga, J. and Nakiganda, P.B. (2020). Postgraduate student research realities in Uganda, In *Postgraduate research engagement in low resource settings*, DOI:10.4018/978-1-7998-0264-8.ch009.
11. Maxwell, T.W. and Smyth, R., “Higher degree research supervision: From practice to theory”, *Higher Education Research and Development* 30(2), 2011 <http://www.informaworld.com/openurl?genre=journal&issn=0729436> (Retrieved on 7 December 2020)
12. Owor, A. (2022). Ethical challenges in university research in Uganda: A critical analysis of student and supervisory practices. *Uganda Journal of Education and Research*, 10(2), 45–62.
13. Mustajoki, H., & Mustajoki, A. (2017). *A New Approach to Research Ethics: Using Guided Dialogue to Strengthen Research Communities*; Routledge: London, UK, 2017.
14. Fox, A., & Busher, H. (2022). Democratising ethical regulation and practice in educational research. *Education Sciences*, 12(10), 674.
15. Shanks, K., & Paulson, J. (2022). Ethical research landscapes in fragile and conflict-affected contexts: Understanding the challenges. *Research Ethics*, 18(3), 169–192
16. Clark-Kazak, C. (2017). Ethical considerations: Research with people in situations of forced migration. *Refugee*, 33(2), 11–17.
17. Busher, H., James, N., Piela, A., & Palmer, A. M. (2014). Transforming marginalised adult learners’ views of themselves. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 35, 800–817.
18. Stark, L. *Behind Closed Doors: IRBs and the Making of Ethical Research*; University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, USA, 2012.
19. Fox, A., & Mitchell, R. (2019). Ethical learning from an educational ethnography. In H. Busher & A. Fox (Eds.), *Implementing ethics in educational ethnography* (pp. 110–126). Routledge.
20. Zhang, J. J. (2017). Research ethics and ethical research: Some observations from the Global South. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 41(1), 147–154
21. Emmerich, N. (2018). From phronēsis to habitus. In *Virtue ethics in the conduct and governance of social science research* (pp. 197–217). Emerald Publishing.
22. Magwa, S., & Magwa, W. (2015). *Understanding research: A student’s guide to research methods and project writing*. Academic Press Africa.
23. Adler, P. A., & Adler, P. (2016). IRB renewal. In W. C. van den Hoonaard & A. Hamilton (Eds.), *The ethics rupture: Exploring alternatives to formal research ethics review* (pp. 73–90). University of Toronto Press.
24. Burke, R., Baker, S., Molla, T., Cabiles, B., & Fox, A. (2024). How do higher degree research students and supervisors navigate ethics-in-practice for educational research in sensitive contexts? *British Educational Research Journal*, 50, 837–854. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3945>
25. Bettez, S. C. (2015). Navigating the complexity of qualitative research in postmodern contexts. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 28(8), 932–954.

Copyright: © 2026 Muhama G. This Open Access Article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.