

# ***A framework for the code of ethics for the LIS profession: a case study of Sri Lanka***

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Ethical behavior and conduct have become highly significant in all professions. In the LIS field, some real life issues faced by librarians and information workers are generally not adequately covered under existing ethical guidelines. Professional ethics, a discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation of conduct governing an individual or a group, should be a governing philosophy. Some of the issues in practicing professional ethics also have different implications from one culture to another. This paper attempts to identify and summarise the main areas, practical issues and relevant sub-areas of professional ethics relating to the LIS field in Sri Lanka.*

**Keywords:** Professional ethics; Code of Ethics; Ethical conduct; Ethical behavior; Librarianship; Information workers

## **INTRODUCTION**

Professional ethics have become highly significant, with varying impact in different professions that function in modern society. Professional bodies are increasingly working on developing, revising and refining codes of ethics for their members. The professionals themselves require detailed codes for greater guidance and discussions to solve ethical dilemmas in their professions. The standards for professional conduct represent a sign of maturity and professional pride when a group is operating under the guidance of an established code of ethics for the profession.

Among the attributes considered in practice to be treated as a profession, Professional Ethics (PE) is a core attribute. Library educator and author, Haines described three attributes of a profession: it must have a Discipline, Ethics and a Vision (Kelly, 2014). Discipline is a subject area or system of training that it deals with; Ethics refers to the formulation of rules of conduct and moral obligations to a particular profession; and a Vision is the outcome or essence expected by that specific Code of Ethics (CoE). Professional ethics can be defined as professionally accepted standards that are to be adhered to by the members of a professional body. The code of ethics provides a set of values and guiding principles for the members of an organization, association or entity for their personal and business behavior. Codes of professional ethics are often established by professional organizations to help guide members in performing their job functions based on sound and consistent ethical principles (Business dictionary.com,

2014). The PE is an influential factor as the controlling guideline for members of an association or a profession, when the behavior or conduct of a member or group of members affects the image of the profession adversely and thereby placing a profession or an association at a critical stance.

It has become highly necessary that LIS professionals be provided with the knowledge to strengthen the application of ethics in their own field. As such, it is necessary to identify PE in the LIS discipline and instill an ethical culture and principles among the LIS professionals. LIS professionals in this context include librarians, information scientists, information officers, documentation officers, bibliographers, indexers, abstractors, etc. When dealing with ethical behavior in LIS, all these categories need to be accommodated in one Code of Ethics document. According to Sturges (2003, 2012), some professional categories cannot be distinguished from the functions of librarians, such as of information scientists' duties and those of a modern librarian. However a Code of Ethics is meant to create a path towards a truly committed profession (Sturges, 2003). The relevance of ethics is becoming more significant for modern librarians as they need to function beyond their traditional roles of resource acquisition, organization and preservation (Vaagan, 2002). With this backdrop, the present paper attempts to identify core areas of ethics that need to be addressed in a CoE document, and eventually propagated among LIS professionals in Sri Lanka.

#### **THE ISSUE IDENTIFIED FOR THE PAPER**

It has been observed at different occasions and through issues faced by the LIS professionals in handling certain situations that there is an emerging need to develop a comprehensive framework for PE for LIS profession in Sri Lanka. It is also essential to propagate PE in an effective manner among librarians of all categories and at all levels of the Sri Lankan library profession to provide professional service to the users while maintaining the professional image of the LIS workers and its Association. The inculcation and upgrading of an ethical culture among librarians is the underpinning strategy to upgrade the profession at all levels, which will eventually lead to 'good governance', 'accountability', 'transparency', 'visibility' and 'recognition' of the LIS profession (Seneviratne & Weerasinghe, 2014).

With this professional requirement, the need to revisit the existing Code of Ethics (SLLA, 1998) drafted by the Sri Lanka Library Association (SLLA) has arisen as one of the prime responsibilities of the association. A new Ethics Committee was appointed to revisit the code and to conduct a preliminary survey before organizing a country-wide survey on identifying areas of ethical conduct for the LIS community in Sri Lanka.

#### **OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER AND THE STUDY DESIGN**

The objectives of the paper are to explore the areas of Professional Ethics specific to LIS field in Sri Lanka, and to analyse the specific issues relating to the broad PE areas identified.

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Librarianship is an ethical activity embodying a value-added approach to professional work with information. The prime functions of information workers are to acquire, organize and provide access to information, and the exchange and sharing of information has grown with paramount importance with the increasing complexity of society. This situation provides a rationale for libraries in 21<sup>st</sup> century to be strong in practicing the librarianship effectively in an ethical manner.

For the analytical design of the study, the core ethical areas identified by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) under Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) were used (IFLA, 2012). Six areas were identified as critical domains for the LIS profession. The document was drafted as an international framework, which is expected to be adopted and enhanced or elaborated upon by any country as the base to develop upon for their own LIS profession. Between 2010 and 2012, a working group from FAIFE consulted extensively and drafted an international code of ethics for librarians and other information workers. Hundreds of comments from IFLA members and non-members were received for the draft and a final version was prepared for the endorsement by the IFLA Governing Board. The *IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and Other Information Workers* was approved in August 2012 (IFLA, 2012).

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The focus of the project design is to draw a framework to develop a Code of Ethics document for Sri Lankan librarianship. The research design was implemented in a two-fold method to achieve the purpose of the project:

1. Selecting and developing core attributes for the Code of Ethics (CoE) document, and
2. Drafting minor attributes relevant to the core attributes.

#### **Selection of Core Attributes**

The IFLA website had uploaded 60 Code of Ethics documents prepared by Library Associations worldwide (<http://www.ifla.org/faife/professional-codes-of-ethics-for-librarians#nationalcodes>, 2012). Some documents contained only the main attributes e.g., Israel, Malaysia, and Malta, while other associations had more descriptions on sub-attributes.

In addition to these documents, a common framework for the LIS Code of Ethics was drafted by IFLA with the initiative of the FAIFE working group (<http://www.ifla.org/news/ifla-code-of-ethics-for-librarians-and-other-information-workers-full-version>, 2012). The set of attributes mentioned therein were selected as the base criteria for the study.

The six core areas of ethics identified by FAIFE working group were:

1. Access to information
2. Responsibilities towards individuals and society
3. Privacy, secrecy and transparency
4. Open access and intellectual property
5. Neutrality, personal integrity and professional skills
6. Colleague and employer/employee relationship

Though the above six criterion core areas cover most aspects of ethics, it was noted that there were additional core values that are suitable to be added to the framework. These attributes were identified from among Asian CoE documents, assuming that the perspective from other Asian countries is suitable in Sri Lankan context too. The Code of Ethics documents from three leading countries in Asia - Korea, Japan and Singapore - were selected based on their descriptive nature and relevancy to Sri Lanka as an Asian country.

Table 1: Matching the FAIFE core attributes with other three documents

	<b>BASE FRAME SELECTED FROM IFLA-FAIFE</b>	<b>KOREAN DOCUMENT</b>	<b>JAPAN DOCUMENT</b>	<b>SINGAPORE DOCUMENT</b>
<b>ATTRIBUTES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collection</li> <li>• Cooperation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibility for library materials</li> <li>• Cooperation among libraries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship to the library user</li> <li>• Relationship with other libraries</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibilities towards individuals and society</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social responsibility</li> <li>• Self growth</li> <li>• Service</li> <li>• Cooperation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibility for the users</li> <li>• Creation of culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship to the library user</li> <li>• <b><u>Responsibility towards suppliers &amp; publishers</u></b></li> <li>• Relationship to the society</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Privacy, secrecy and transparency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibility for the users</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship to the library user</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open access and intellectual property</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality, personal integrity and professional skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dignity</li> <li>• Self growth</li> <li>• Professionalism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attitude</li> <li>• Responsibility in training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colleague and employer/employee relationship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social responsibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b><u>Responsibility as a member of an organization</u></b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relations to the governing authority</li> <li>• Relationship to the staff</li> <li>• Relationship to his profession</li> </ul>

### **Matching the Core Attributes**

The IFLA FAIFE document (FAIFE, 2012) was compared with the CoE frames from Korea, Japan and Singapore for the core attributes, as shown in Table 1.

The FAIFE core attributes of CoE are given in the first column (shaded) and the CoE documents selected for the review are given in the other 3 columns. The attributes of three countries selected were placed according to the description given in relevance to the main attribute of the documents. It was noticed however that the core attributes mentioned in the documents prepared by three selected library associations did not match entirely with the attributes of FAIFE frame.

When matching with the the FAIFE base criteria, it was found difficult to select exact idea to match the FAIFE attributes; for example a main attribute of 'Cooperation' in the Korea document has a broader meaning. It discussed about cooperation among libraries, among agencies and attitude towards information exchange in a social service context (last clause of the Cooperation section. <http://archive.ifla.org/faife/ethics/klacode.htm>). Hence some attributes that are mentioned therein had to be placed in more than one value in FAIFE code.

It was also noticed that some attributes (underlined in the table) were additional to the FAIFE frame. Those aspects were placed against a 'near matching' Base Attribute. These attributes can be treated as important in the context of a profession. For example, in Japan, CoE document 'Responsibility as a member of an organization' and in Singapore document, 'Responsibility towards suppliers & publishers' can be treated as suitable to mention as a Core Attributes. Hence it was decided to add these two aspects as core values in Sri Lankan document (see Table 2).

In the FAIFE core values, the 4<sup>th</sup> attribute did not get matching values among selected three CoE documents hence was kept blank in the matching columns. According to the analysis it was observed that matching of attributes that are indicated in the above table is not 100% accurate. However in building up base frame for a Code of Ethic document for Sri Lanka was done using FAIFE base criteria and adding up few other attributes from Japan document and Singapore document, which are shown in Table 2.

### **DRAFTING THE MINOR ATTRIBUTES**

After identifying core areas of ethics, the description or minor areas pertaining core areas need to be identified. These sub-attributes specifically deal with the issues relating to a country and in this case, the Sri Lankan context. The methodology used to draft sub-attributes was as follows.

- **Discussion 1**

Information, ideas and opinions were collected through a series of discussions carried out among the members of the Professional Ethics group of the Sri Lanka Library Association. The composition of the ethics group was 1 retired senior librarian, 2 special librarians and 3 university librarians. The group included President, Vice President and the Secretary of the Sri Lanka Library Association. The views expressed by the

discussants were taken down and reviewed by the author before compiling into sub areas into the CoE frame.

Table 2: Core attributes selected

<b>Attribute no.</b>	<b>Core Attributes identified</b>	<b>Document Referred</b>
1.0	Access to information	FAIFE
2.0	Responsibilities towards individuals and society	FAIFE
3.0	Privacy, secrecy and transparency	FAIFE
4.0	Open access and intellectual property	FAIFE
5.0	Neutrality, personal integrity and professional skills	FAIFE
6.0	Colleague and employer/employee relationship	FAIFE
7.0	Responsibility to the Professional organization	Japan
8.0	Responsibility towards publishers and suppliers	Singapore

• **Discussion 2**

Some informal discussions were carried out by the author in informal gathering of librarians at different occasions. This information were used to draft a preliminary framework of Ethics for the Association, the themes of which are listed in the section 4 below, under eight core areas mentioned in the Table 2.

Information service in the domains of socio-cultural, socio-technological and socio-economic well-being is the prime motive of librarianship and which indicates that the librarians have social responsibility in delivering their service. The essence of librarianship implies the recognition of information rights of the citizen as a social being. Therefore any attribute that is analysed under principles of professional ethics should be evolved around the said recognition.

**Attribute 1 - Access to information**

The core mission of librarians and other information workers is to ensure access to information for all for personal development, education, cultural enrichment, leisure, economic activity and informed participation in and enhancement of democracy (FAIFE, 2012).

- Librarians and other information workers use the most effective ways to make the material accessible to all. Librarians should also arrange for access to their collections and services free of charge for the user.
- The access not only implies the material processing at the acquisition or processing divisions, but also ;

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- Informing the requester the receipt of the material when received in the library
- Easy loan scheme to obtain a material as soon as it has arrived in the library
- Immediate reprography, scanning or a system providing of a particular information block to the requester
- Unbiased attitude towards users in providing knowledge materials
- Not making unnecessary comments when loaning a book/material
- The acquisition process should ensure confidentiality of the origin of recommendation of materials unless extremely essential to expose
- The requesting party of a material has a right to know whether material recommended by them are received in the library
- The donations of materials are equally important as purchased materials
- The librarians treat information resources as the wealth and worth of the library and promote its use maximally. To ensure the maximum use LIS workers promote and publicise their collection and services so that users and prospective users are aware of their existence and availability of the same to demand and access when an information need had arisen.
- Promotion and publicity shall include following strategies except making references of materials for the library catalogue;
  - The new acquisitions/subscriptions need to be captured in documentation products such as in indexes, bibliographies, abstracting services etc. and in current awareness products such as new acquisition lists, current content services, etc.
  - These information products should ensure accessibility of medium and format by user community with inclusion criteria of differently-able users
  - For this purpose, the websites of libraries should comply with international standards for accessibility and usability criteria and should ensure minimum access barriers

### **Attribute 2 - Responsibilities towards individuals and society**

In order to promote inclusion and eradicate discrimination, librarians and other information workers should ensure that the right of accessing information is not denied and that equitable services are provided for everyone irrespective of their age, citizenship, political belief, physical or mental ability, gender identity, heritage, education, income, immigration and asylum-seeking status, marital status, origin, race, religion or sexual orientation (FAIFE, 2012). Under this main concern, the following sub-areas and points shall be taken into consideration.

#### **Rights of citizens:**

- LIS workers ensure the right of citizens to acquire information when in need by providing access to materials.
- The library service should ensure provision of information in registered languages within a political boundary of a country as much as possible, depending on the availability of those materials in such alternative languages. If

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not available in those languages, official language shall be preferred in purchasing the materials for its users.

- Librarians support users in their information searching by providing unbiased recommendation for the materials in question and ensure avoiding distortion of information at all cost.
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### **Promotion of Literacy reading skills**

- The LIS workers should promote basic information literacy skills including the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize and create, use and communicate information, and other skills such as IT skills, reading skills etc. as a social responsibility.
- The library may offer services to increase and promote reading skills using a standard criteria such as SQR3 method or other standard reading methods.
- And they promote the Ethical and Fair Use of information thereby making an ethical ground to eliminate plagiarism and other forms of misuse of information.

### **Conservation**

- Librarians should protect the collection from human threats such as theft, damage and mutilation, and careless handling of materials.
- LIS workers should be aware of environmental conditions as threats for the preservation of the collections and train themselves on the techniques and strategies to conserve different categories of materials/resources/collections from climatic conditions, disaster management, and from the effects of aging.

### **Fairness towards of minors and minorities**

- Librarians and other information workers respect the protection of minors while ensuring this does not impact on the information rights of adults.
- The librarians may consider and study the locality of the library and presence of minority groups and special needs to be catered for.

### **Attribute 3 - Privacy, secrecy and transparency**

Librarians and other information workers respect personal privacy and the protection of personal data. The relationship between the library and the user is one of confidentiality and librarians and other information workers will take appropriate measures to ensure that user data is not shared beyond the original transaction. They also recognize that it is in the public interest that misconduct, corruption and crime be exposed by what constitute breaches of confidentiality by so-called 'whistleblowers' (FAIFE, 2012). According to local context following issues emerged as serious concerns.

- Personal data submitted to the library for various official purposes should not be disclosed to any other party unless otherwise required by a court order or for another official purpose within the institution.
- The Librarians protect members' data from possible unauthorized access to the membership files/databases.
- Librarians always maintain an honest attitude and self-esteem and maintain dignity as professionals in all communications and involvements with outside parties and organizations



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- All the process phases and measures taken need to be well documented (manual of procedures) for the purpose of continuing the process from any given point of the procedure.
- Librarians and other information workers define and publish their policies for selection, organisation, preservation, provision, and dissemination of information (FAIFE, 2012).
- If using the information and data for research purposes, the librarians should retain the anonymity of the data used and should not reveal personal details and should not reflect any personal bias of its members in the presentation.
- Membership data or any other personal information should not be used or provided to a third party for the purpose of manipulating another personal trait.

#### **Attribute 4 - Open access and intellectual property**

Librarians and other information workers' interest is to provide the best possible fair access for library users and support open access, open source, and open licenses.

- It is the main mandate of librarians to provide fair and effective access to information for its users.
- Librarians are obliged to advocate for exceptions and limitations to copyright restrictions for libraries.
- Librarians and other information workers are stakeholders of the publishing of knowledge hence the intellectual property right of authors and other creators need to be respected.
- Librarians negotiate the most favourable terms for access to works on behalf of their users and seek to ensure that access is not unnecessarily prevented or hindered by the mode of administration of intellectual property (IP) laws and that licenses do not override exceptions for libraries contained in national legislation (FAIFE,2012).
- It is the duty of Library Association to encourage government to establish an intellectual property regime and adjust and amend the terms mentioned therein according to the changing scenario of the information landscape.
- The IP laws need to be adjusted in such a way to ensure appropriate balance between the interests of rights of holders and the institutions.

#### **Attribute 5 - Neutrality, personal integrity and professional skills**

Librarians and other information workers are strictly committed to neutrality and an unbiased stance regarding collection, access and service. Librarians strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing their knowledge and skills (FAIFE, 2012).

- Neutrality results in the most balanced collection and the most balanced access to information achievable.
- They distinguish between their personal convictions and professional duties. They do not advance private interests or personal beliefs at the expense of neutrality.
- Librarians strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing their knowledge and skills by attending relevant symposia, seminars, conferences, etc.
- They aim at the highest standards of service quality and train themselves accordingly and thus promote the positive reputation of the profession.

**Attribute 6 - Colleagues and employer/employee relationship:**

Librarians and other information workers treat each other with fairness and respect. Librarians and other information workers oppose discrimination in any aspect of employment because of age, citizenship, political belief, physical or mental ability, gender, marital status, origin, race, religion or sexual orientation (FAIFE, 2012).

- Librarians are entitled to equal payment and benefits for holding comparable jobs, regardless of gender and other factors, and they should promote the equal existence within the profession.
- Librarians and other information workers share their professional experience with colleagues and they help and guide new professionals to enter the professional community and develop their skills.
- They contribute to the activities of their professional association and participate in research and publication on professional matters.
- They treat the professional contribution as a professional duty.
- Librarians strive to earn a reputation and status based on their professionalism and ethical behaviour.

They do not compete with colleagues by using unfair methods and do not discriminate among colleagues by their seniority of age or service, race or by any other inappropriate attributes when acknowledging the contributions they made for the profession.

**Attribute 7 - Responsibility towards the Professional Organization:**

- Librarians understand the necessity and significance of being a member of a professional organization and take active part in these organizations
- Librarians should demonstrate the autonomy as LIS professionals and should try to maintain appropriate social status on par with the other professionals
- In case of a standpoint where a parent organization violates or going against the norms of LIS profession, the librarians are responsible to make the situation clear to the authorities of the organization upon their professional beliefs
- Librarians always should be obligatory not only to their parent organization but also to their profession
- Any individual or group of librarians should not use the name and logo of the professional association for their personal benefits.
- Librarians who hold positions in the professional association should bear collective responsibility in professional dealings and persevere confidentiality of the dealings of the association.

**Attribute 8 - Relationship to publishers and supplying agencies:**

- Librarians stick to the institutional policies, government rules and regulations in dealing with publishers and supplying agencies
- Librarians should never enter into a business dealing on behalf of the library which results in personal gain, profit or personal gratuities
- Librarians should be fair and transparent in making decisions in relation to the dealings with the outside parties

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- Librarians and other information workers counter corruption directly affecting librarianship, as in the sourcing and supply of library materials, appointments to library posts and administration of library contracts and finances (FAIFE, 2012).
- Librarians and other information workers support the transparency in all procurement processes according to the procurement guidelines stipulated from the Ministry where institution belongs to, or by any other set of regulations followed by the institution.

## **SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION**

There is an essential need identified by the Sri Lanka Library Association to revisit the Code of Ethics prepared in 1998 due to various social, professional and regulatory issues that have emerged within the profession. Librarianship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century faces numerous challenges when dealing with ever changing information landscape which needs certain set of skills and competencies and ethical control. It is observed that the librarians and information workers require knowledge and a level of training in professional ethics and related ethical behavior and conduct to sustain the profession to maintain the dignity, accountability and the recognition of the profession. The country has more than 3,800 library professionals in different categories of libraries belong to different institutional environments. It is observed that most of the librarians adhere to some level of 'self or group decided ethics' but not have been professionally trained or cultured on 'LIS Ethics' to be quality professionals to be on par with other professions in the country, e.g., medical, legal, etc. The value of the concept and the necessity to be cultured as professionals is not understood by most of the librarians and LIS schools and SLLA had taken initiative to inculcate the practice as a formal behavior in the LIS profession.

Proper awareness and inculcation of PE will place the LIS professionals in Sri Lanka in two advantageous positions: a) Correct attitude in practicing the profession ethically and b) Consciousness of moral values in practicing the profession. These two factors are treated as highly favourable for development of any profession and will affect LIS profession favourably in: a) Maintaining of the image of LIS Profession b) Library administration & Management c) Morale of the library staff and its patrons d) Procurement of assets and its control and e) Providing constructive service provision. Therefore it is expected to build up professionalism of Sri Lankan librarians in a strong manner by adopting and inculcating professional ethics among them.

The paper has attempted to summarize the ethical issues that need to be addressed for the librarianship in Sri Lanka at all levels as a preliminary framework for an appropriate Code of Ethics that has to be drafted by the SLLA. The paper adhered to six level criteria of ethics adopted by FAIFE in 2012 and endorsed by IFLA. It was observed that some of the attributes mentioned in the FAIFE document ([http://\\_www.ifla.org/ifla-code-of-ethics-for-librarians-and-other-information-workers-full-version](http://_www.ifla.org/ifla-code-of-ethics-for-librarians-and-other-information-workers-full-version)) has over laps among 6 criteria and the author had tried to introduce new areas that suitable to include in Asian context.

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