To Share or Not to Share Knowledge: An Ethical Dilemma for UK Academics?

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ABSTRACT:

Effective knowledge sharing is at the heart of organisational life; for universities it is the core of their existence. Knowledge is shared not only with students and society, but it is also shared between Faculty staff and in collaborative arrangements with external enterprises. The need to disseminate knowledge so widely has drawn attention to related ethical considerations – this is the focus herein. This paper explores the ethical concerns raised about the sharing of knowledge by academics in two Faculties at a British university, and the influence of those concerns on the willingness of academics to share their knowledge. In doing so, the paper shares the findings of a pilot study and intends to prompt further debate about, and research into the relationship between ethics and knowledge sharing.

Keywords: *Knowledge sharing, Ethical concerns, Academics, Universities*

1. Introduction

In the contemporary environment, knowledge is increasingly viewed as the primary determinant of organisations, including universities, to renew and innovate. Historically universities served as reservoirs of knowledge (Basu & Sengupta 2007, p.274) but are no longer providing knowledge only to students or society; they are managing and sharing available knowledge amongst Faculty members (Daud & Sohail 2009, p.126) and with private enterprise. Thus the effective sharing of knowledge is an integral element of universities. It is also one of the ethical challenges to universities, particularly at a time when their role is being reframed by external pressures. In view of this, the purpose of this modest study is to trigger further and more in depth study of the relationship between ethics and knowledge sharing, and, in particular, in the Higher Education sector.

The paper begins by providing background information on knowledge sharing within universities and explaining relevant concepts. The following section briefly describes the methodology employed to conduct the empirical research. Results of a survey and interviews are then presented, followed by a discussion of the findings. The paper concludes with a summary and reflections on the limitations of the study.

2. Background

Universities are increasingly leveraging their intellectual assets to drive operational performance, create sources of commercial innovation, accelerate learning outcomes (Riege 2005) and derive revenue. The trend in knowledge sharing should increase as public funding for education continues to shrink (Buchbinder 1993, p.332) and pressures to produce quality graduates to meet the needs of industry show no signs of abatement (Confederation of British Industry 2009, p.5). At the same time demands for value for money outcomes in higher education are growing, as are government beliefs that knowledge activities will contribute to economic development (William-Jones 2005, p.249).

3. Knowledge Sharing

Various studies have empirically identified organisational, technological and individual factors as impeders to knowledge sharing (for example, Riege 2005; Husted & Michailova 2002). Yet empirical work to research the effects of ethics upon knowledge sharing is rather limited. In fact, much of the literature on knowledge sharing routinely associates knowledge with positive connotations (Alter 2006; Hosein 2005; Amjad at al 2007). The genial view of work presented by Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) where people care and trust each other and readily share knowledge, has been followed by more recent authors. These assumptions belie the complexities and ethical difficulties stemming from knowledge sharing. In reality, life is rarely convivially ambivalent; it is characterised by co-operation and collaboration on the one hand and by control and coercion on the other hand (Kling 1991). The omission, suppression, distortion and manipulation of knowledge are also important factors (Amjad et al 2006, p.2). Although documented instances of ethical concerns impeding knowledge sharing are few in the literature, issues have emanated from the discourse. This found support in empirical work conducted by Wang (2004), which suggested individual ethical concerns can reduce intention to share knowledge.

3.1. Philosophical Aspects Of Knowledge Sharing

The following question highlights the ethical quagmire that is knowledge sharing – Is it natural to share? According to Wang (2004, p.371) knowledge sharing is assumed to be the norm and inherently ethical. Styhre (2002, pp.232-233) observes the knowledge economy is based upon the principles of sharing, rather than restrictions on the utilisation of finite resources. In fact, Da Costa et al (2008) and Britz at al (2006), believe employees are morally obligated to share knowledge that benefits their organisation.

In contrast, Davenport & Prusak (1998), assert that acquiring, much less sharing, knowledge is an unnatural act and the normal reaction of individuals is to hoard knowledge. If knowledge is so valuable, why would anyone give it away? With the mindset that knowledge is power, individuals are reluctant to share knowledge (Britz et al 2006); Disterer 2001, p.2). Abu Hasan et al (2009) take a more philosophical stance and believe knowledge is personal, the sharing of which breaches personal boundaries.

3.2. Value Of Knowledge

The tacit knowledge academics possess constitutes the bulk of a university's intellectual capital (Jain et al 2007, p.25). For such knowledge to have any real utility and constitute a source of value creation, it must be continually shared. Knowledge sharing is "making available what is not known" according to Awad & Ghaziri (2004, p.249), or the mutual exchange of experience, events, or understanding on anything between at least two parties (Daud & Sohail 2009, p.129). The personal knowledge of an individual is a source of wealth, stature and respect, usually the product of, practice, education or learning, exacted over time. This is particularly true of academics. The individual may not be adequately remunerated for sharing knowledge or may be diminished (Baskerville & Dulipovici 2006, p.5) or devalued by sharing their knowledge. The fear of "free-riding" may also deter knowledge sharing; self–interested individuals may exhibit Machiavellian behaviour and be tempted to benefit from the shared knowledge of others, without contributing to its provision (Cabrera & Cabrera 2002, pp.692-3) by hoarding their own knowledge.

3.3. Ownership Of Knowledge

The possibility of losing control of knowledge may deter academics from sharing it, which raises vexed ethical issues of ownership. (Fernie et al 2003, p.179) Should such knowledge be the currency of society? Alternatively, are universities the rightful owners of the personal knowledge of their employees, or is knowledge the attribute of the autonomous academic who generated it (Baskerville & Dulipovici 2006, p.2)? McKinlay (2000, p.119) and Constant et al (1994, p.404) concur with the view of tacit knowledge "as the currency of the informal economy of the workplace". Gorman (2004) argues knowledge created in the course of employment is the intellectual capital of the individual, and organisations should refrain from asserting Orwellian type control over it. Viewing knowledge sharing from a human rights perspective, Baskerville & Dulipovici (2006, p.2) contend such personal knowledge is the private attribute of individuals and its forcible sharing could violate individual privacy rights. Murphy (2008, p.162) takes a pragmatic approach in this long running debate over ownership by individuals to knowledge as against the rights of others to share it. He argues that knowledge "is an evolutionary process not a point in history." He questions how individuals can lay claim to knowledge seeking to protect it under intellectual property rights, when its acquisition was made possible by the body of knowledge accumulated by others hitherto.

3.4. Misuse Of Knowledge

As in other organisations, the possibility of the misuse of one's shared knowledge may discourage academics from sharing. Trust is a presupposition to many knowledge intensive activities, including knowledge sharing practices. Academics are unlikely to share, take risks or collaborate in an environment of mistrust (Miles 2007, p.195). They may be reluctant to share knowledge fearing someone else may receive unfair recognition and accreditation for their work (Riege 2005, p.23); they will be insufficiently rewarded (Britz et al 2006) or be dismissed. Bryant (2006) supports this fear of dismissal arguing knowledge activities are simply a euphemism for reducing the workforce. Intertwined with trust is the notion of privacy. Individuals may also be adverse to sharing knowledge if they have concerns regarding the accessibility and disclosure of their knowledge (Britz et al 2006) to unauthorised parties. Another concern is the omission, suppression, exaggeration or misuse of shared knowledge (Alter 2006) exemplified by the Enron Scandal (Wilson 2002).

3.5. Commercialisation Of Knowledge

The linkage between universities and industry with a view to share and produce commercial knowledge raises new ethical concerns for academics. According to William-Jones (2005, p.249) it may pose a threat to the availability of knowledge. He argues that free access to knowledge as a shared resource will be diminished, when it is "enclosed" and "owned" by corporations. The sharing of knowledge amongst the academic community may be reduced when research is patented by private companies, as exemplified by the patenting of 20% of the human genome in America (Ravilious 2005) which others were unable to freely access.

Private finance for university research often stipulates conditions that scientists sign non-disclosure agreements, or delay publication pending the outcome of patent applications which can lead to the gagging of researchers (William-Jones 2005, p.249) or suppression or misrepresentation of research (Kohler 2004, p.482). "Access to organisations and acceptance of research" may depend on the support of university management which could compromise the views of academics and lead to a bias in behaviours such as sharing any knowledge produced (Amjad et al 2007). Buchbinder (1993, p339) goes as far as to say, "responsibility to one's peers ... is abandoned for responsibility to the organisation/corporation funding the project".

3.6. Requirements For An Ethical Framework

As the demands of academia grow and the sharing of knowledge takes a central role, the traditional apparatus for identifying and resolving issues may prove inadequate (Fisher 2003, p.171) and in need of an overhaul or modernisation, so as to provide guidance for contemporary ethical dilemmas. Like most professions, academics are already governed by their university's code of ethics or similar instruments. However, such ethics are general to the organisation, and not necessarily specific to knowledge sharing.

A partial solution would be the enactment of a proper ethical framework- a professional code of ethics defining a core set of values and behaviours specifically relating to knowledge sharing as implemented by Buckman Industries (Talisayon 2007, pp.24-25).

4. Methodology

With this in mind, the empirical data collection was designed so as to explore the relationship between ethical concerns and the intentions and knowledge sharing practices of academics, contributing to a rather limited area of research.

An online survey was employed to gather data from academic staff in 2 faculties at a British University. A total of 20 responses were received, 12 from Faculty A and 8 from Faculty B. Although this was a limited response rate, it was sufficient data from which to draw some preliminary results. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted to complement the findings of the survey-one with a female academic from Faculty of A and a one with a male academic from Faculty B.

Influenced by Daud & Sohail (2009), the survey was based on ethical variables identified from extant literature. These are knowledge ownership, value of knowledge, misuse of knowledge, commercialisation of knowledge and the philosophical aspects of sharing knowledge. The survey was divided into two sections. The first gathered demographic data. The second section comprised statements to measure the ethical variables listed above. A 4 point Likert scale from one (strongly disagree) to four (strongly agree) was employed with an additional response to each statement of "I have no view".

5. Analysis Of Results

This section will review the findings of the survey and interviews, following a brief overview of respondent demographics.

5.1. Profile Of Respondents

The demographic profile of respondents categorised in age, gender, years of work experience and current position is provided in Table 1. Respondents are grouped into Faculties A and B for comparison.

Table 1: Demographics Of Respondents

Profile	Classification	Faculty of A (No. of respondents)	Faculty B (No. of respondents)
Age (Years)	21-30	4	0
	31-40	3	0
	41-50	1	2
	51-60	0	7
	60>	0	3
Gender	Male	6	5
	Female	1	7
	Not Specified	1	0

Working Exp. (Years)	<10	6	2
	11-20	2	4
	21-30	0	2
	31-40	0	3
	40>	0	1
Current Position	Lecturer	1	2
	Senior Lecturer	0	6
	Reader/Professor	1	1
	Research Ass./Researcher	6	0
	Other	0	2

Ages of respondents in Faculty B ranged from 41-60 years, with 51-60 being the dominant age group, while the majority of respondents in Faculty A were aged 21-30, indicating a younger workforce. Notwithstanding the greater number of responses from Faculty B, respondents in Faculty B had substantially more working experience and occupied more senior academic positions than respondents in Faculty A. With respect to gender, respondents from Faculty A comprise of 6 males and 1 female. In Faculty B, 7 respondents were female and 5 male, representing a more even division.

5. 2.   Survey And Interview Findings

The survey comprised 19 statements (S1-19) to gauge the influence of the ethical variables mentioned earlier. Each statement is taken in turn and responses considered.

5.2.1. Philosophical Aspects Of Knowledge Sharing

The introductory section featured four statements to gauge opinion on knowledge sharing practices in the workplace.

S1. The sharing of knowledge with colleagues is fundamental to workplace ethics.

Figure 1: The Importance Of Knowledge To Workplace Ethics
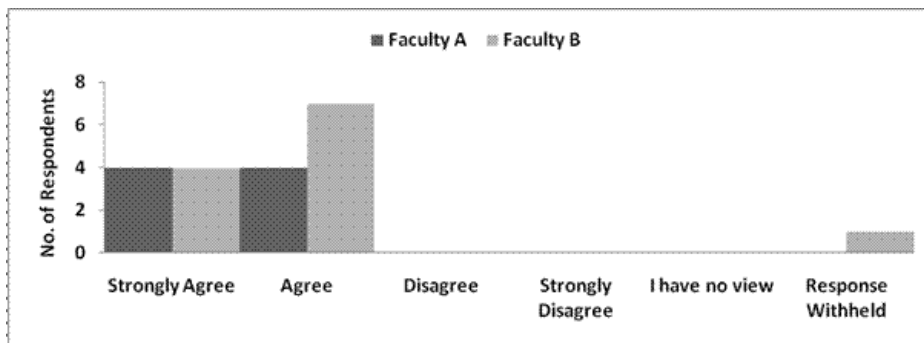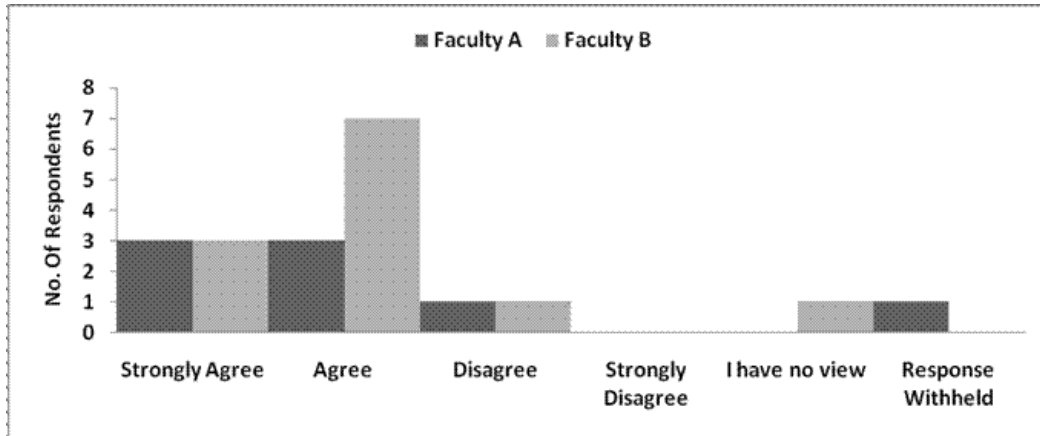

Of the 20 respondents in both Faculties, apart from 1 who refrained from answering, all agreed or strongly agreed that knowledge sharing was fundamental to the workplace. This view was held regardless of age, gender, academic role or working experience. Several explanations emerged from the interviews as to why sharing knowledge is so fundamental in the workplace. The advancement of research, the respect of colleagues and the empowerment and increase in value of the sharer were cited as reasons for sharing.

S2. Knowledge is a source of power.

In this instance, Faculty results mirrored each other. Of the 12 respondents in Faculty B, 10 agreed or strongly agreed with the adage "knowledge is power", 1 disagreed and 1 had no view. These responses mirrored the findings of Faculty A, where 6 of the 8 respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, 1 disagreed and 1 refrained from answering.

Figure 2: Views On Adage "Knowledge Is Power."

*S3. Refusal to share knowledge with colleagues is ethical behaviour.*

Though the vast majority of respondents in both faculties viewed knowledge as a source of power, they largely believed that refusal to share that knowledge was not ethical. As illustrated by Figure 3, only 2 of 8 respondents in Faculty A agreed refusal to share knowledge was ethical; the rest disagreed or strongly disagreed. 7 of the 12 respondents in Faculty B were of the same opinion and 5 had no view on the subject.

Figure 3: The Ethics Of Refusal To Share Knowledge
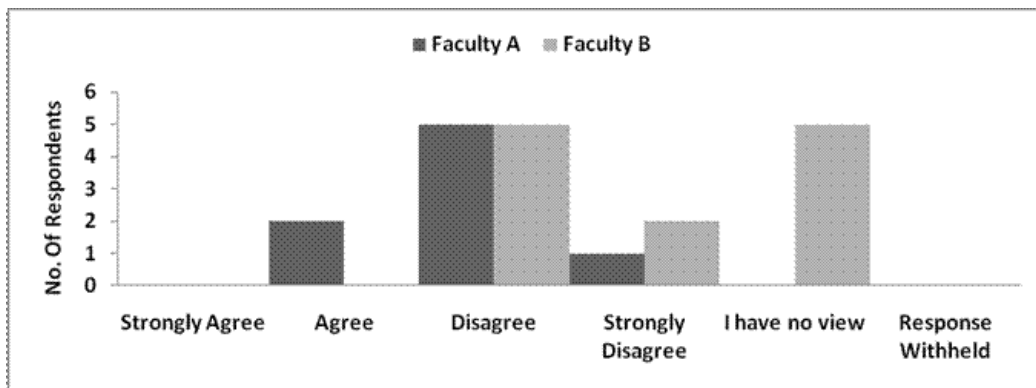
S4. The hoarding of knowledge is an unacceptable practice.

**Figure 4: Ethics Of Knowledge Hoarding Practices**
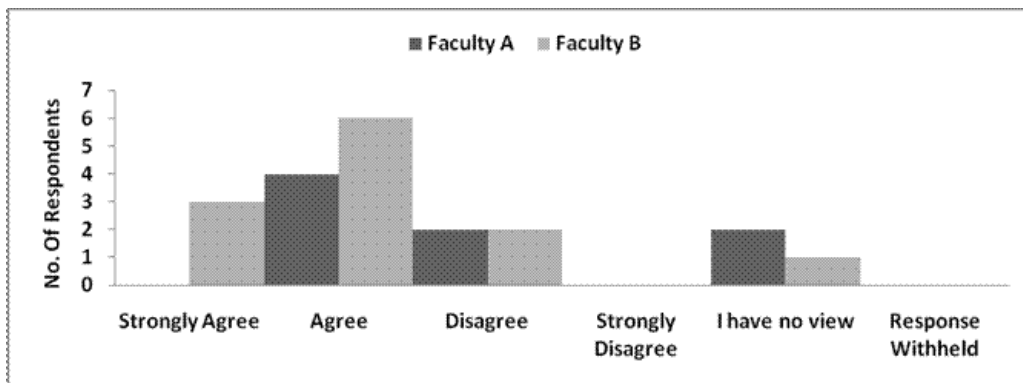
When asked whether the hoarding of knowledge was unacceptable, 4 of the 8 respondents in Faculty A agreed while In Faculty B, 9 of the 12 respondents, strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. In both Faculties, 2 respondents disagreed.

5.2.2 Value Of Knowledge

The section comprised of three statements sought to elicit views on the value attached to knowledge.

S5. I am adequately remunerated for sharing knowledge with others.

**Figure 5: The Value Attached To Knowledge**
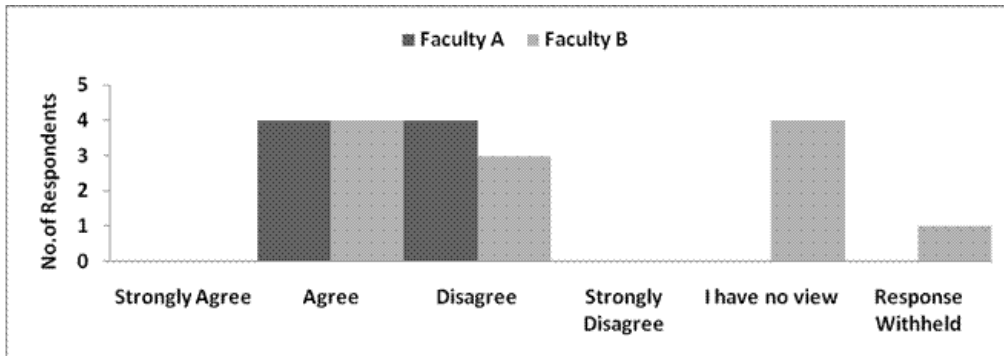
The contentious issue of remuneration for sharing knowledge yielded surprisingly mixed results. Of 8 respondents in Faculty A, 4 agreed they were adequately remunerated, while the other 4 disagreed. In Faculty B, of the 12 respondents 4 agreed, 3 disagreed and unusually 4 held no view. 1 did not answer the question. While there is discontent, there is not an overwhelming level of feeling amongst respondents they were not adequately compensated for sharing knowledge.

S6. It is acceptable to benefit from the shared knowledge of others without contributing anything to it.

The views expressed on this issue were somewhat mixed as illustrated by Figure 6. Of the 8 respondents in Faculty A, 2 agreed that it was acceptable to "free ride" on the back of other people's knowledge, 3 disagreed, 1 had no view and 2 did not answer. In Faculty B, there were similar results; of 12 respondents, 5 agreed with the statement, 6 disagreed and 1 had no view. A significant minority, rightly or wrongly believe it is acceptable to benefit from the shared knowledge of others, without contributing to its provision.

Figure 6: Responses To "Free-Riding "Off Other People's Knowledge
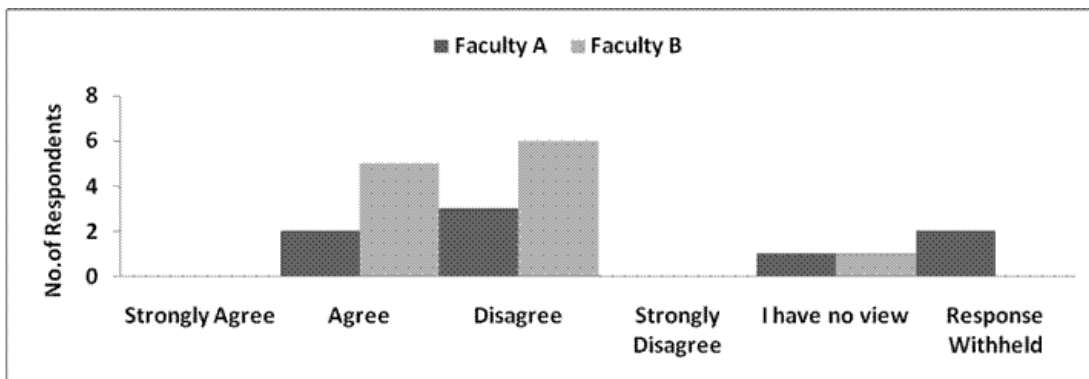
S7. I will be diminished or devalued by sharing my working knowledge with others.

The overwhelming majority of respondents, as shown in Figure 7, from Faculty A felt that they would not be diminished or indeed devalued by sharing and respondents from Faculty B held similar views. Contrary to the academic discourse, the majority of respondents in this survey do not consider their value to be correlated to the knowledge they possess. In the follow-up interviews, both academics stated they were respected more by their colleagues for sharing and the academic from Faculty B, felt her value was actually enhanced by sharing knowledge. She said "Sharing knowledge is power, because if you share knowledge people know what you know, people know you share and people therefore come to you wanting to interact with you."

**Figure 7: Effects Of Knowledge Sharing On Personal Value**
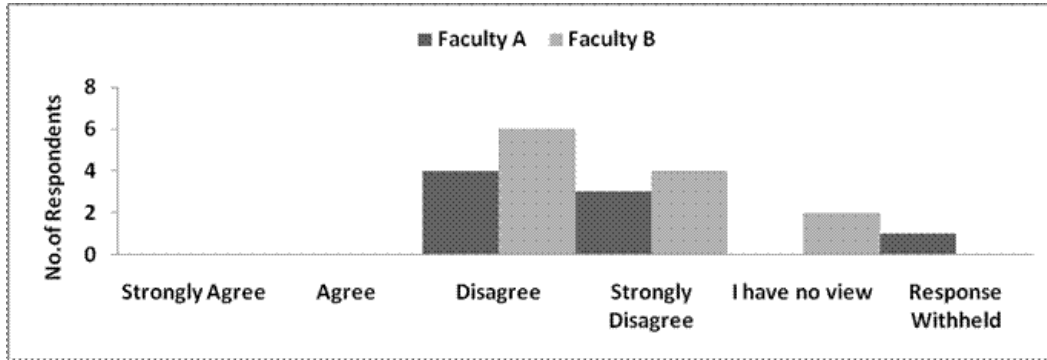
5.2.3. Ownership Of Knowledge

The purpose of this section, comprising of two statements was to ascertain the views of respondents as to the ownership of knowledge created in employment.

S8. Any knowledge created in the course of employment should belong to the individual.

Figure 8: Response To Ownership Of Intellectual Property Created At Work
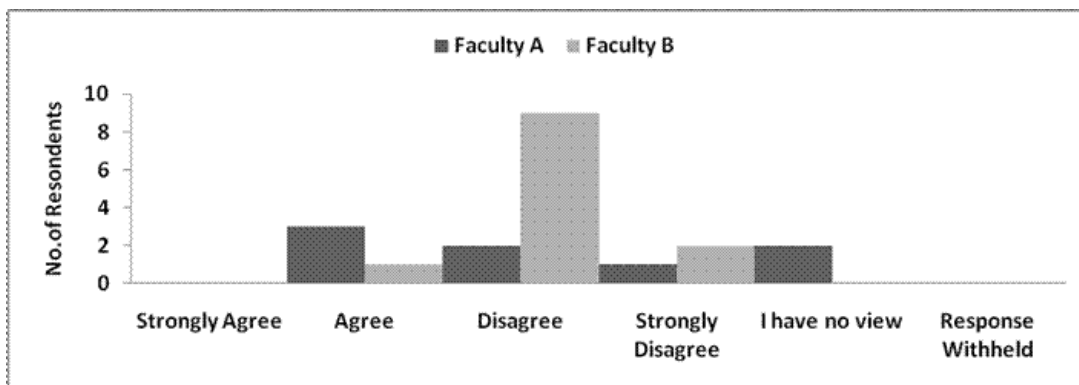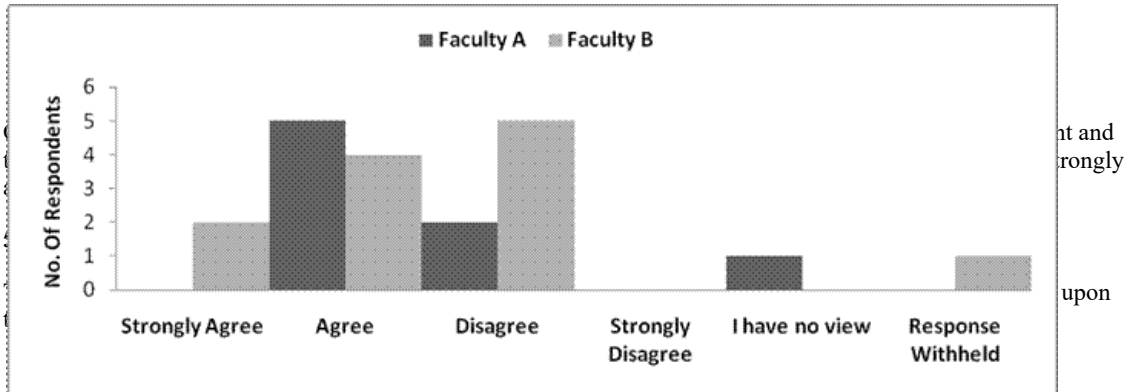

Of the 12 respondents in Faculty B, 1 agreed with the statement, but the remainder disagreed or strongly disagreed. In Faculty A, the results were more mixed. Of the 8 respondents, 3 agreed with the statement whereas 3 disagreed or strongly disagreed that individuals should own knowledge created at work and 2 had no view. These results reflect academic opinion which is also divided on ownership of intellectual property in the workplace.

It is interesting to note that 11 respondents in Faculty B who disagreed that knowledge created at work belongs to the individual were over 40, whereas respondents in Faculty A who thought otherwise were under 40. This indicates that the younger academics in this sample are more inclined to claim knowledge created at work.

*S9.The possibility of losing ownership of knowledge to others deters me from sharing it.*

Figure 9: The Response To The Effects Of Losing Ownership Of Knowledge

The misuse of knowledge would not diminish the willingness of most respondents in Faculty A to share knowledge, in contrast with their more experienced and mature colleagues in the Faculty B. Of 8 respondents in Faculty A, 3 agreed or strongly agreed they would be deterred from sharing whereas 5 disagreed or held no view. However, of the 12 respondents in Faculty B, 8 agreed or strongly agreed misuse of knowledge would reduce their preparedness to share, 2 held no view and 2 withheld their response.

These findings tend to suggest older and experienced academics are more likely to be wary of others misusing their knowledge than younger colleagues.

Figure 10: Responses On The Misuse Of Knowledge
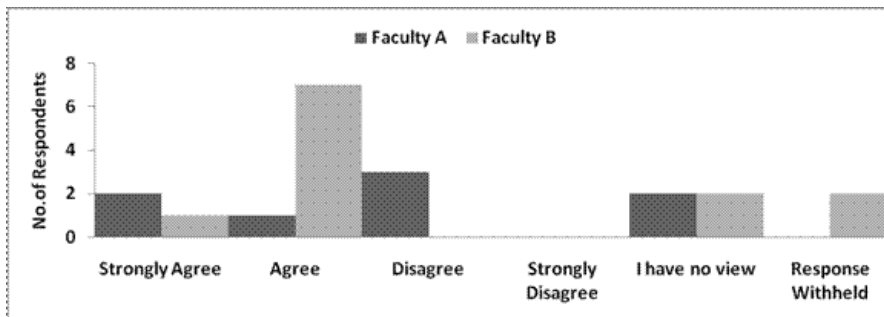
*S11. I am less likely to share knowledge with people I do not trust.*

The findings of this statement confirmed that trust plays an integral part in the knowledge sharing process within organisations. All of the respondents in Faculty A agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they were less likely to share knowledge with people they did not trust. The respondents in Faculty B unanimously agreed or strongly agreed with their counterparts in Faculty A.

Figure 11: The Importance Of Trust In Knowledge Sharing
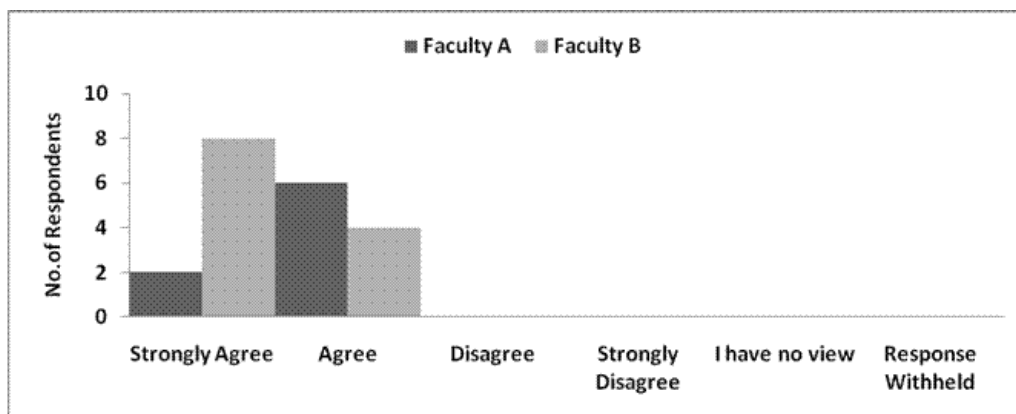
S12.The possibility that someone else may receive unfair recognition or accreditation for my knowledge acts as a deterrent to knowledge sharing.

Figure 12: Effects Of Unfair Recognition Or Accreditation For Knowledge Sharing.
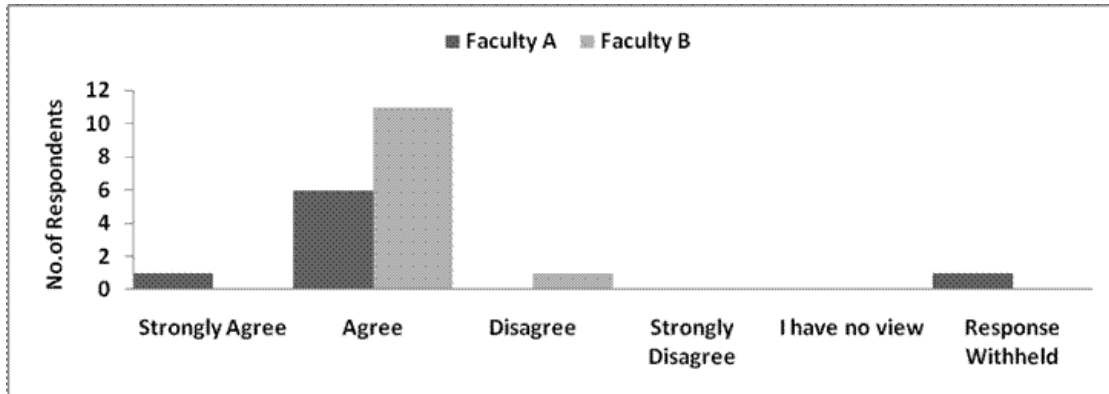
another impedes knowledge sharing even more than the potential misuse or loss of ownership of knowledge. Of the 8 respondents in Faculty A, 7 agreed or strongly agreed and 1 refrained from answering, whereas of 12 respondents in Faculty B, 11 strongly agreed or agreed with the statement and 1 disagreed.

The interviews managed to shed light on why recognition and accreditation are so important to academics. The effort and hard work academics invest in research and innovation was cited as one reason. Another was the fact that job prospects and research funding were linked to publications, for which academics must be given credit. "Publish or perish" was how one academic described the situation. This is perhaps reflective of the fact that the stature, reputation and job prospects of academics are inextricably correlated to their knowledge.

5.2.5. Commercialisation Of Knowledge

This section comprised six statements and sought to gauge opinions on the increased sharing of knowledge by universities with private organisations.

S13. Universities have gone too far towards the production and sharing of knowledge for commercial purposes.

Only 3 of the 12 respondents in Faculty B thought that universities had moved too far towards the sharing of knowledge for commercial gains, 5 disagreed and 4 expressed no view. This is curious given the prominence of the third stream in academic institutions today. In Faculty A, opinion was more evenly divided as 4 of the 8 respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the view and the other 4 disagreed.

**Figure 13: Views On The Increasing Commercialisation Of Knowledge**
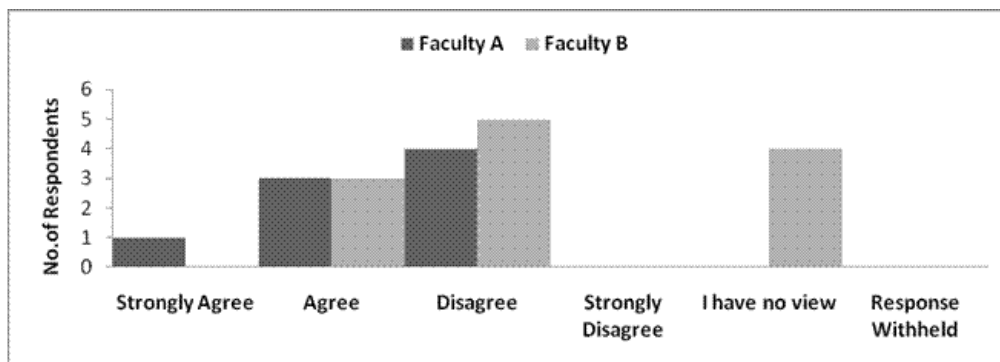
In summarising the attitude of fellow academics, the academic from Faculty B said: "I am not in agreement or disagreement. It just happens. It is the situation as it is today, because everyone including academics need

money", while the academic from Faculty A supported this view and said "All universities are doing that to stay in the market."

S14. I am deterred from sharing knowledge when it is for commercial purposes.

The results of statement 13 revealed that only a minority of academics in Faculty B thought universities had moved too far towards the production of commercial knowledge; however the findings of this statement suggest they would be deterred from sharing knowledge if universities moved further down that road. Of 12 respondents from Faculty B, 7 agreed or strongly agreed they were deterred from sharing knowledge for commercial purposes whereas 3 disagreed, 1 had no view and 1 refrained from answering. In contrast, of 8 respondents in Faculty A, only 3 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement while 5 disagreed, strongly disagreed or held no view.

**Figure 14: Effects Of Commercialisation Of Knowledge**
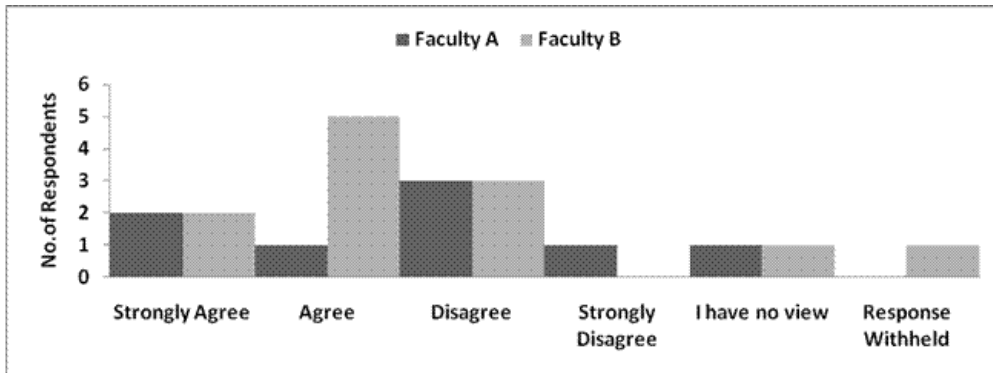
Of 12 respondents from Faculty B, 7 agreed or strongly agreed they were deterred from sharing knowledge for commercial purposes whereas 3 disagreed, 1 had no view and 1 refrained from answering. In contrast, of 8 respondents in Faculty A, only 3 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement while 5 disagreed, strongly disagreed or held no view.

S15. I am more inclined to share knowledge when it would help advance the knowledge of the community as a whole than for commercial purposes.

In both Faculties, the majority of respondents were more inclined to share knowledge for community purposes than for enterprise. Of 8 respondents in Faculty A, 5 strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, whereas 1 disagreed, 1 held no view and 1 did not answer the question. Of 12 respondents in Faculty B, 9 strongly agreed or agreed, while 2 held no view and 1 refrained from answering.

**Figure 15: Opinions As To The Social Value Of Knowledge**
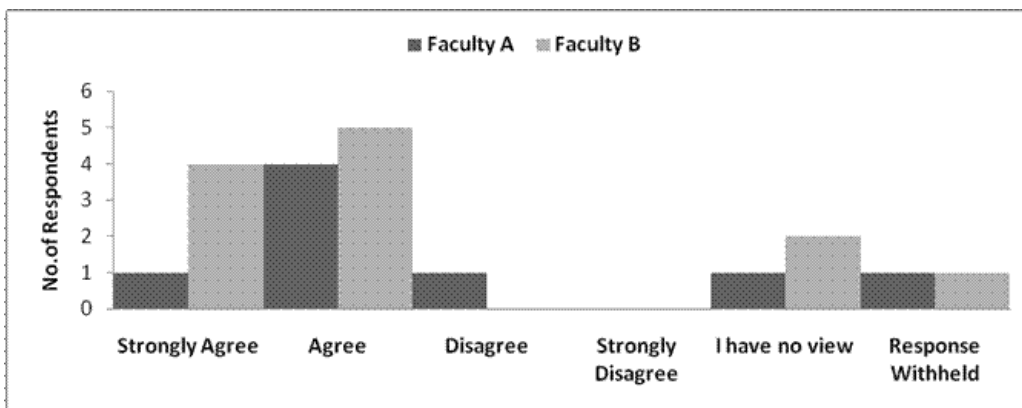
In the follow-up interviews the academic from Faculty B said she did not have a preference and would share for commercial and social reasons but the academic from Faculty A said he was more likely to share knowledge that

benefitted society. He said, "We are all driven by money but I would not sell my knowledge for some cheap money."

S16. Claims of ownership to knowledge by commercial organisations reduce the sharing of knowledge amongst the academic community.

Figure 16: The Reduction Of Knowledge Within Academia
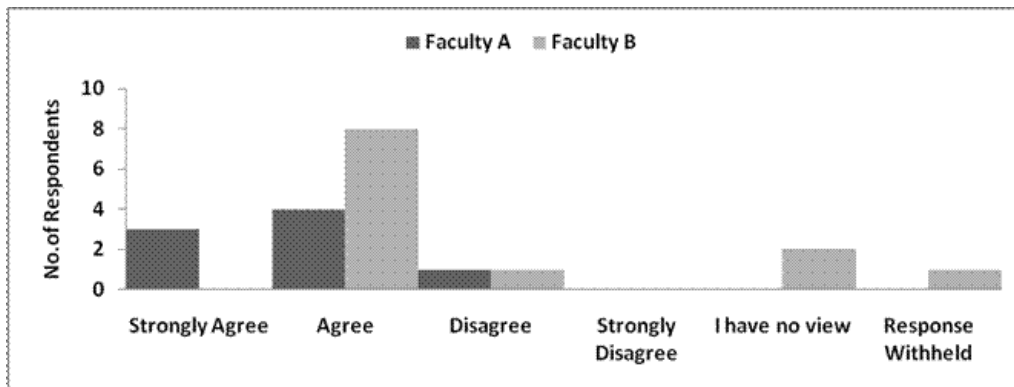
ement.
7 of 8 respondents from Faculty A agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while 1 disagreed. Meanwhile, in Faculty B, of 12 respondents 8 also agreed with this view, 1 disagreed, 2 had no view and 1 refrained from answering.

5.2.6. Ethical Framework

The final statement was designed to elicit the opinion of respondents on the possibility of enacting a code of ethics or providing guidance to specifically regulate knowledge sharing practices.

S18. The University should provide guidance or enact an ethical framework specifically for knowledge sharing practices.

The majority of the respondents in both faculties agreed that the University should adopt guidelines or implement an ethical framework regulating knowledge sharing practices. Of the 8 respondents in Faculty A, 6 agreed with such measures, 1 strongly disagreed and 1 refrained from answering. In Faculty B, 7 of the 12 respondents agreed or strongly agreed, 2 disagreed or strongly disagreed, 2 had no view and 1 refrained from answering. This may indicate that the current codes of ethics adopted by Universities are insufficient or do not adequately cover knowledge sharing practices, if at all.

Figure 17: Views On Implementation Of An Ethical Framework
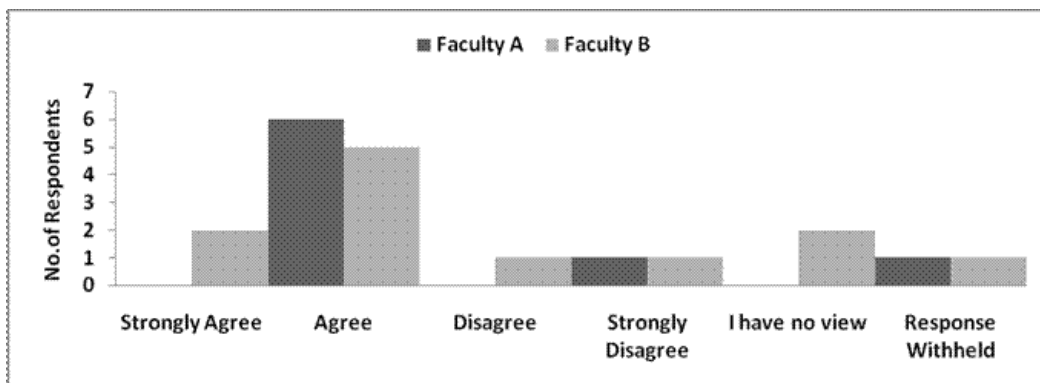
Perhaps echoing the sentiments of the minority, both of the academics interviewed opposed a code of ethics and viewed self-regulation as a more effective means of governance. The academic from Faculty A commented "I don't think any regulations or code at the university can bring about any necessary change that could affect the process". The academic from Faculty B added "I think that I am mature and ethical enough to judge for myself without the imposition of any sort of extra regulation."

6.   Discussion And Implications

6.1.   General Findings

Technological, organisational and human factors have been empirically found to influence knowledge sharing negatively or otherwise. The findings of this study show there is a relationship between ethical concerns and the intention to share knowledge and that ethical concerns can reduce the intention and practice of sharing knowledge. This study supports the work of Wang (2004) who found that ethical concerns of individuals reduced the intention to share knowledge.

Overall, there was no significant difference in opinion of academics from Faculties A and B respectively, suggesting staff across departments share similar concerns. However, opinion was divided on the contentious issues of sharing of knowledge for enterprise and ownership of knowledge, reflecting the findings of academic literature.

6.2.   Specific Findings

More specific findings are now related as each section of the questionnaire is now revisited.

6.2.1. Philosophical Aspects Of Knowledge Sharing

Many institutions are faced with the challenge of changing the prevalent attitude of employees from that of "knowledge is power" towards the notion that "sharing knowledge is power." That was not the situation here; the research showed that all academics thought knowledge sharing was fundamental to the workplace. The advancement of knowledge, increased respect of colleagues, the interests of the department and self-empowerment were reasons cited for this view.

6.2.2. Value Of Knowledge

It is widely acknowledged that knowledge has value but rewarding and placing a monetary value on that knowledge is controversial. The findings revealed there was discontent amongst academics regarding remuneration levels which deterred a few academics from sharing knowledge. This suggested that personal income levels were not a significant predictor to effective knowledge sharing, at least not amongst the academics in this study.

Even less influential for academics in this study was the perceived diminishment or devaluation of an individual by sharing knowledge with others. This is curious given that the value of a person is correlated to *what* they know and *how much* they know. This is perhaps even truer of knowledge workers such as academics, whose primary source of value is related to their tacit knowledge.

6.2.3. Ownership Of Knowledge

Some academics may be deterred from knowledge sharing by the possibility of losing ownership of one's knowledge to someone else. Opinion was divided on the issue of ownership of intellectual property created at work, reflecting the wider tension between knowledge as a public benefit and a private good. It will be interesting to see whether academics continue to lay claim to knowledge in the era of the open source movement where others are freely sharing knowledge.

6.2.4. Misuse Of Knowledge

The possibility that shared knowledge may be misused reduces the preparedness of some academics to share knowledge. While the findings suggested the misuse of knowledge is an impediment, it was not as influential a factor as anticipated. Interestingly, the data revealed the more experienced academics were, the more they were deterred from sharing their knowledge for fear of its misuse.

One of the more revealing outcomes of the research was that academics view the prospect of someone else receiving recognition or accreditation for their knowledge as one of the biggest barriers to knowledge sharing. These findings support Riege (2005, p.23) who suggested the ultimate driver of knowledge sharing for most companies is the prospect of increasing profitability, whereas employees are motivated by the prospect of receiving just recognition for work, incentives and remuneration.

In line with previous studies (Riege 2005; Lin 2007) trust was an integral part of the knowledge sharing process as evidenced by academics unanimous agreement that they were less likely to share knowledge with people they did not trust.

6.2.5. Commercialisation Of Knowledge

In contrast to the academic literature which presented a picture of escalating commercialisation of knowledge within universities, the majority of academics in this study did not believe that universities had moved too far towards the sharing of knowledge for commercial innovation. However some academics may be deterred from sharing knowledge when it is commercially driven. The implication is that universities may not be able to generate as much revenue from their knowledge assets, as they would have liked.

Despite the increased linkage between universities and industry, the majority of academics who responded still placed greater emphasis on knowledge sharing for societal benefits than commercial reasons. This indicates that academics still have high regard for the role universities have traditionally played in society. In addition, academics agreed that one of the negative outcomes of the commercialisation of knowledge was the reduction in the sharing of available knowledge within academia as suggested by William-Jones (2005, p.249).

6.2.6. Ethical Framework

Most of the respondents welcomed an ethical framework or guidance, to nurture and promote the highest standards of intellectual honesty and integrity in knowledge sharing practices within academia. Those opposed to the idea cited the abundance of regulations already in existence and means of circumventing such rules, suggesting self-regulation as an alternative.

7.   Conclusions

From the results of this study it can be seen that ethical factors such as lack of trust, the potential misuse of knowledge, the possibility of losing ownership of knowledge, the sharing of knowledge for commercial enterprise, the prospect of someone else receiving recognition or accreditation for the knowledge of another and inadequate remuneration for sharing knowledge may impede knowledge sharing. The extent to which ethical concerns influence knowledge sharing is determined by the nature of the ethical variable.

While this study makes a contribution to this under researched area, limitations are recognised. The exploratory nature of the study, the limited size of the sample and the inclusion of members from two faculties from one British University, cannot provide conclusive confirmation of all the issues raised. Nonetheless this small-scale study, generated promising results, provided useful insights to the ethical dilemmas confronting universities and raised issues for further study. In addition, the identification of potential ethical impeders to knowledge sharing provides points of reference for universities to enhance knowledge sharing practices.

8.   References

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