

# Knowledge Ambassadors: Enhancing Tacit Knowledge Transfer in Kenyan Universities

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**Abstract.** Universities in Kenya have invested in library services and resources to support their teaching and learning activities. However, these resources are not used adequately leading some universities to develop partnership programmes with students, known as knowledge ambassadors, to educate their peers about library resources and services available in their institutions. This study sought to describe the concept of knowledge ambassadors from a knowledge management perspective; investigate where and how it has been deployed in universities in Kenya; analyse how effective knowledge ambassador programmes in Kenyan universities have been; identify the challenges affecting its effective use for tacit knowledge creation and sharing; and propose strategies which can be used by academic institutions in Kenya to enhance the effectiveness of their knowledge ambassador programmes.

Primary data was collected through interviews with knowledge ambassadors and librarians selected through information-oriented purposive sampling from four public universities in Kenya. The findings indicate that eight private and public universities in Kenya have launched knowledge ambassador programmes. The benefits of the programmes include increased usage of the information resources by users in the institutions as well as deepened user participation in the design, development and deployment of library services and products. The findings also revealed that the impact of the programmes is hampered by time constraints; misconception about the expectations of the ambassadors; inadequate infrastructure; and inadequate funding. These findings can be used by universities in Kenya to develop policy frameworks which leverage the impact of knowledge ambassador programmes on tacit knowledge creation, validation, sharing and use.

**Keywords:** Tacit knowledge · Knowledge ambassadors · Knowledge peer groups · Knowledge volunteers · Kenya

## 1 Introduction

Tacit knowledge can be perceived as the personal, private, informal, un-codified, context-based experience or know-how [6, 14]. It also refers to the insightful and hard-to-define experiential knowledge. It is the most precious source of original new knowledge [13] and the basis of expertise which can give an organisation a unique competitive advantage in any corporate environment [11, 17]. According to Botha *et al.* [5]

tacit knowledge is found in human minds and includes values, attitudes, skills and capabilities. It is generally considered to be non-verbal, inarticulable, unconscious or ineffable [1, 15, 16]. Tacit knowledge provides the foundation which enables individuals to deal with emerging issues [2, 10] and facilitates rapid decision making and action without requiring lengthy deliberation [9]. Atwood [3] explains that tacit knowledge includes personal contacts, networks and relationships which are difficult to remove from the owner.

Tacit knowledge is generally acquired through direct experience. However, as Dalkir [8] argues it can be transferred through coaching and mentoring on a one-to-one, face-to-face basis. O'Dell and Hubert [14] supports this view and explain that tacit knowledge is so hard to catalogue, difficult to document and ephemeral that it can only be shared through interactions. One of the major challenges hampering the effective creation, sharing and use of tacit knowledge is the difficulty of capturing, storing or sharing it. Dalkir [8] explains that highly skilled, experienced and expert individuals find it harder to explain their know-how. He explains further that novices, on the other hand, are more apt to easily verbalise what they are doing because they typically follow manuals or how-to processes. Therefore, tacit knowledge is generally created and shared through diverse forms of conversations and collaboration between individuals or groups.

As centres of scholarly endeavour, universities greatly depend on the effective creation, sharing and transformation of tacit knowledge in the form ideas, innovations, networks and linkages into explicit knowledge. Most universities commit huge resources to knowledge development through research and other related programmes. These efforts are, however, being held back by internal competition, lack of trust, inappropriate organisational structures and culture and lack of cooperation between knowledge teams. Consequently, many universities are currently exploring diverse strategies of mitigating poor tacit knowledge creation and sharing in the institutions. One of the strategies some universities have adopted is the use of students as knowledge ambassadors. The knowledge ambassadors are student volunteers who are willing and excited to promote information services to their peers. There is great need for peers to participate in knowledge sharing because it improves communication between information centres and peer community; develops user-centred services; and taps peer energy and creativity. According to Collison & Parcell [7] knowledge ambassador programmes involve peers learning from each other and trying to come up with solutions to their specific knowledge needs and thus create a highly focused environment for knowledge sharing and cooperation. Knowledge sharing is also done through mentoring which is like a corporate social responsibility programme amongst peer groups as they share their knowledge, experience and ideas with others. Knowledge ambassador programmes thrive on mutual commitment, respect and trust.

## 2 Study Rationale

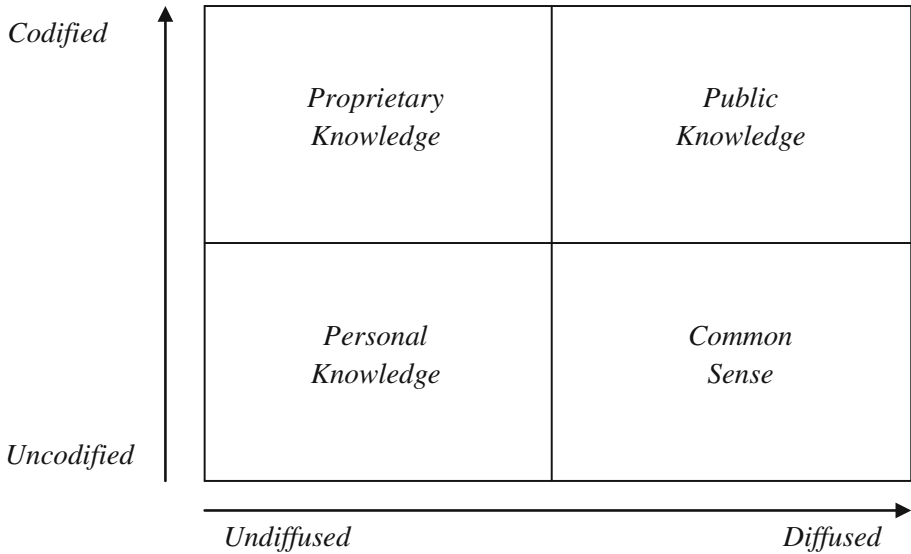
Universities in Kenya have invested in library services and resources to support their teaching and learning activities. The resources include digital and electronic collections. However, library usage statistics indicate that these resources are not used adequately by the primary academic library users – the academic staff and students.

The low usage has been attributed to a lack of awareness of the resources; inadequate information literacy skills amongst the library users; presence of alternative sources of information in the academic infosphere; overloaded curricula leaving the students and staff with little or no time to use the library resources; and a poor perception of the real value of academic library services and resources. Most universities have deployed diverse marketing programmes in their efforts to increase the usage and impact of library resources and services. Some of these programmes include social media marketing, exhibitions, posters, promotional merchandise and information literacy classes. In spite of these efforts, most academic libraries in Kenya still register low usage. This situation led some universities to develop partnership programmes with students, known as knowledge ambassadors, to educate their peers about library resources and services available in their institutions.

Although knowledge ambassador programmes were launched over two years ago, no study seems to have been conducted to investigate their role in tacit knowledge creation and sharing. Since their actual or potential role in tacit knowledge management has not been investigated, most of the institutions deploying the programmes have not received the possible optimum benefits. Given the pressure on universities and academic libraries to remain relevant in a fast-changing and competitive world, the contribution of effective tacit knowledge management to their overall performance and impact cannot be ignored. This study sought to bridge this gap by describing the concept of knowledge ambassadors from a knowledge management perspective; investigating where and how it has been deployed in universities in Kenya; analysing how effective knowledge ambassador programmes in Kenyan universities have been; identifying the challenges affecting its effective use for tacit knowledge creation and sharing; and proposing strategies which can be used by academic institutions in Kenya to enhance the effectiveness of their knowledge ambassador programmes.

### 3 Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Max Boisot's i-space knowledge management model. In this model, Boisot proposes the concept of "information goods" which users extract from data but dependent on their expectations and prior knowledge. He argues that the effective movement of information goods is dependent on senders and receivers sharing the same coding scheme or language [8]. He further argues that effective extraction and sharing of information goods depends on the context and interpretations of the users [4]. This model underscores the role of shared coding scheme, language, context and interpretation in the creation, extraction or sharing of knowledge. Boisot's i-space is similar to Nonaka and Konno's [12] "ba" concept in the improved Nonaka and Takeuchi's [13] Socialisation, Externalisation, Combination and Internationalisation (SECI) model in which the role of a conducive space is emphasised as a determining factor of the effectiveness of key knowledge management processes such as origination, dialogue, systematisation and application [12]. Both models emphasise the role of face-to-face interaction in effective knowledge creation and sharing. Figure 1 below presents the i-Space model.



**Fig. 1.** i-Space model

The authors used Boisot’s i-space model complemented by Nonaka and Konno’s [12] “ba” to explore the role of socialisation and face-to-face interactions in tacit knowledge creation and sharing. They also used the two models to understand the attributes of a “ba” conducive for effective tacit knowledge management. Knowledge ambassadors as peers of their fellow students have a shared coding scheme (knowledge categorisation), language and context. Knowledge ambassadors require a “ba” which is safe, trustworthy, free, accessible, convenient, adaptable, natural, supportive and usable to be effective.

#### 4 Methodology

This study was designed as an exploratory survey since the concept of knowledge ambassadors is fairly new in Kenyan universities. Exploratory research approach was flexible thus enabling the authors to investigate the research questions exhaustively. Primary data was collected through key informant interviews with twenty (20) knowledge ambassadors and two (2) librarians selected through information-oriented purposive sampling from four public and private universities in Kenya. The interviews, which were conducted using semi-structured guides administered by the authors in the respective university campuses of the respondents, enabled the authors to obtain in-depth data from persons who understood knowledge ambassador programmes well. The use of key informant interviews also enabled the authors to obtain diverse opinions and perspectives based on the respondents’ experiences and contexts. The authors also managed to obtain in-depth responses by adopting a face-to-face approach which enabled them to clarify responses. Additional information on knowledge ambassadors as peer educators as well as the challenges facing university libraries in Kenya was

collected from relevant documentary analysis. Information thus obtained triangulated the primary data and enhanced the validity of the findings. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics. This analysis technique was chosen because it enabled the authors to summarise, interpret and describe the data in a way that reveals their meanings within the context of the study.

## 5 Findings

The findings of the study are presented and discussed hereunder.

### 5.1 The Concept of Knowledge Ambassadors in Kenya

The respondents indicated that knowledge ambassadors in Kenyan universities are student volunteers who support academic librarians in their efforts to increase the use of library information resources. They further explained that these volunteers are energetic, passionate and enthusiastic about the role libraries play in academic settings. The ambassadors act as peer educators empowering and encouraging their colleagues to use library resources. Knowledge ambassadors are identified, recruited and trained by the librarians.

The respondents also explained that they first got to know of the knowledge ambassadors' concept through a workshop conducted by Emerald Insight at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa in 2013. The training was primarily aimed at enhancing the use of e-resources available in Kenyan academic libraries by the students. The training was attended by thirty (30) students drawn from The Cooperative University College of Kenya, The Technical University of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology and the Presbyterian University of East Africa. The participants were exposed to the Emerald e-resources available in their libraries as well as how best to use them. They were also asked to share the same knowledge with their colleagues. In this regard, they were given library promotional materials to distribute to their friends. The original participants in this workshop became known as Emerald Knowledge Ambassadors. Members of this pioneer group initiated knowledge ambassador programmes in their universities.

The findings also show that knowledge ambassadors in Kenyan universities act as knowledge champions, change agents, peer trainers as well as knowledge advocates and brokers. As volunteers, they perform these roles on a part-time basis. Furthermore, their influence is localised and generally restricted to their peer groups and specific university campuses only. The respondents explained that to perform their roles effectively, knowledge ambassadors need flexibility, goodwill, positive attitude, resilience, tolerance and good interpersonal skills. They also need to be proactive, analytical, committed, and familiar with their library information services and resources. They also need to earn the respect of their colleagues and librarians.

From the foregoing, it is evident that knowledge ambassadors are actually knowledge champions willing and excited to work with librarians to enhance the use of library resources. These ambassadors, just like other knowledge champions, need specialised technical skills and personality traits to succeed in their communities.

Librarians as well as the other stakeholders, such as scholarly publishers, support the ambassadors to develop the technical skills and aptitude to be effective champions. Although universities in Kenya and other countries operate in diverse contexts, the concept of knowledge ambassadors can be customised and replicated in any academic setting.

## **5.2 Deployment of Knowledge Ambassadors' Programmes in Kenya**

The findings revealed that knowledge ambassadors in Kenyan universities are identified and recruited by librarians through diverse outreach programmes including training events, library or information weeks, exhibitions, and specialised information literacy programmes. During these programmes, the librarians appeal to the participants to volunteer their time and skills as knowledge ambassadors. The librarians take the contacts of those who express interest and invite them to capacity development programmes through which they are empowered to work as knowledge ambassadors.

The respondents said the concept is currently deployed by academic libraries at The Technical University of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Strathmore University, Cooperative University College of Kenya, Daystar University, Presbyterian University of East Africa, Tangaza University College and Catholic University of Eastern Africa. It is noteworthy that all the universities implementing knowledge ambassador programmes, except three, are privately owned. Recognising the fact that there are more chartered public (22) than private (14) universities in Kenya, the higher number of private universities deploying knowledge ambassador programmes may be explained by their customer-centric orientation. Given that private universities operate in more competitive environments than their public counterparts, they may have been encouraged to embrace knowledge ambassador programmes as a means of enhancing their competitive advantage. Furthermore, most private universities in Kenya are smaller than the public universities and are keen to integrate the students' participation in as many programmes as possible. This situation may have also been motivated by the strict accountability frameworks private universities operate in. Academic libraries in private universities are, for instance, required to account for their resources as a way of demonstrating the return on investment they accrue for their parent institutions. With the increasing demand for better impact by public universities through performance contracts, it is expected that more of them will adopt knowledge ambassador programmes as one of the strategies to enhance their relevance. Similarly, with the growing popularity of university ranking frameworks such as Webometrics, more universities are likely to initiate knowledge ambassador programmes to increase their research output thereby enhancing their ranking.

## **5.3 What Knowledge Ambassadors in Kenyan Universities Do**

Asked to indicate what knowledge ambassadors in their universities do, the respondents said that they generally promote library resources and services. They pointed out that the ambassadors particularly encourage the use of electronic resources the universities have. These electronic resources are made available by the libraries by subscribing to e-journals available through the Kenya Library and Information Service

Consortium (KLISC) in collaboration with the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP). The ambassadors use myriad tactics in their work. For instance, in one university, the knowledge ambassadors organised a beauty pageant dubbed “Mr and Miss Open Access” to promote the use of electronic open access materials.

The respondents still emphasised that the knowledge ambassadors also help in promoting the other library resources as well. They do so by managing social media platforms for their libraries, holding exhibitions, developing and promoting library websites, and designing and disseminating library brochures. Respondents from one private university also reported that knowledge ambassadors also promote library services and resources using the university’s FM radio station so as to reach more actual and potential information users. Still in another university, the respondents reported that the knowledge ambassadors participate in corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes. The example of such a CSR programme is supporting the services offered by a community library in a slum area in Nairobi. Apart from helping to offer general library services, the ambassadors also tell stories or read books for pupils using the facility.

In two universities, the knowledge ambassadors also organise learning events such as knowledge cafes where the students meet to share experiences on topical issues of interest. These meetings, generally held once a semester, provide platforms where students exchange tacit knowledge and create contacts for subsequent interactions and learning. The respondents explained that although the forums were originally meant for learning about library services and resources, they have since mutated to cover all knowledge areas of interest to the students. Consequently, they are used for brainstorming, mentorship, incubation and innovation. Their informal and voluntary nature has endeared them to many students. In fact, they are gradually turning into communities of practice which are better structured and focused. Given that modern students generally trust their peers more than authorities, these forums provide platforms with a greater potential to facilitate effective tacit knowledge creation and sharing.

Many of the students in universities in Kenya are in their late teens or early twenties. This age group struggle with many social challenges which in some cases result in dropouts, poor performance or deviant behaviour. Since most knowledge ambassadors are generally disciplined, diligent and cooperative students, they act as role models for their colleagues who learn from their experiences and determination thus reducing the impact of teen challenges on their studies. Anecdotal evidence from the respondents seems to indicate that knowledge ambassadors are excellent academic performers who are respected by their peers. Thus their influence goes beyond the original scope of work.

Knowledge ambassadors also help to extend library support services to the students’ halls of residence and other places of presence where they act as embedded librarians. Given their first-hand understanding of their curricular requirements as well as their experience with library resources, they are able to identify and respond to their colleagues’ information needs promptly and more accurately. Academic librarians are not able to be available in all places on campus or where the students live or learn. Conversely, the knowledge ambassadors walk, work, live and learn with their colleagues and are able to offer prompt support at the point of need. However, the respondents emphasised that the ambassadors need a higher level of information literacy to be able to

help their colleagues competently. Nonetheless, all the librarians who responded to the study asserted that knowledge ambassadors go through elaborate training which builds their capacity to help their colleagues as a first-aid measure where and when it is not possible to get services from the librarians.

The knowledge ambassadors have also conducted workshops on plagiarism and related issues; competitions on issues related to information services and resources; compiled and disseminated documentaries on relevant topics; written and circulated poems; developed scripts and acted skits and short plays; as well as developed and presented conference papers on issues which influence the access and use of diverse information resources in academic libraries.

It is evident from the foregoing that knowledge ambassador programmes in Kenyan universities were originally conceived to support the promotion of electronic resources in their libraries. However, as the programmes matured, the ambassadors have gradually picked up other roles which are not directly related to libraries. Although the roles vary from institution to institution, they are generally aimed at providing the students with the knowledge and resources to enable them to make the best use of their time and opportunities on campus. Significantly, the ambassador programmes are gradually mutating into communities of practice and other forms of knowledge networks which provide “ba” conducive for tacit knowledge creation, validation, sharing and application. It is possible that the ambassador programmes will become better structured over time and be able to generate greater impact for their parent institutions.

#### **5.4 The Benefits of Knowledge Ambassadors Programme**

All the respondents were of the view that the knowledge ambassador programmes have generated benefits in their institutions. They identified the benefits as increased usage of the information resources by users in the institutions; better attitudes and appreciation for the librarians and library resources; deepened user participation in the design, development and deployment of library services and products; improved information literacy skills amongst the students; increased number and scope of innovations amongst the students and other library users; better understanding of the challenges, needs and wants of students by the librarians; reduction of operational costs associated with the promotion of library services and resources; greater ownership of libraries by the students; increased relevance of library services and resources; and increased effectiveness of the academic libraries in fulfilling their mandates to their parent institutions.

The findings above demonstrate the fact that knowledge ambassador programmes have real benefits for academic institutions. The benefits above, albeit varied, mainstream the impact of libraries on organisational performance. Librarians are encouraged to harness the full potential of these programmes in their contexts.

#### **5.5 The Challenges Hampering the Impact of Knowledge Ambassadors**

Although the respondents were unanimous that their institutions have benefited from knowledge ambassador programmes, they also pointed out that the institutions are not realising the full potential of the programmes. All the respondents said that time



constraint was the major challenge the knowledge ambassadors face. Given that they are fulltime students who must also carry full academic loads, most of them find it difficult to create adequate time for ambassadorial activities. Consequently, some programmes have had to be delayed or conducted over a longer period of time than is desirable.

Another major challenge is a misconception of what the knowledge ambassador concept really is. This misunderstanding results in the ambassadors taking up roles they are either not able or not expected to perform. The misunderstanding sometimes results in conflicts or poor delivery of services. One university also reported that some of the ambassadors used their positions as a springboard into student politics or to solicit other favours from the librarians, students and the university management. Such ambassadors were not effective because they were perceived as dishonest.

The programme has also been affected by its volunteerism nature. It is not easy for the librarians to demand results from the ambassadors knowing that they are just volunteering. Similarly, some ambassadors do not feel obligated to perform their roles and only participate in the programmes which they find exciting or gratifying. This situation was identified by the librarians as one the major risks of the programme. They have attempted to mitigate it by making the programme as exciting as possible and giving the ambassadors incentives such as branded merchandise and opportunity to attend training workshops.

The other challenges identified by the respondents include lack of adequate funds to facilitate outreach activities; inadequate infrastructure such as computers and bandwidth to support the effective access and use of electronic resources amongst the students; overstretching the programme to include issues which are not related to information access and use; burnout of the ambassadors; unpredictable information needs and seeking behaviour; and competing student, library and institutional programmes.

## **5.6 Strategies Institutions Can Use to Enhance the Impact of Knowledge Ambassadors**

The respondents recommended that for the programme to run efficiently and effectively, the institutions should allocate adequate funds to it. The librarians should also develop and implement an extensive mentorship programme to the ambassadors so as to fully build their capacity to perform their roles. The respondents also emphasised that the libraries should develop a sustainable framework for appropriately rewarding the ambassadors, especially those who excel in their duties. This can be done by giving incentives like participation certificates and publishers tokens. Furthermore, the institutions can treat knowledge ambassador programme as student work programmes through which the ambassadors may be paid a stipend. This way, the libraries can demand accountability from them. The other strategies recommended by the respondents include more investment in infrastructural development; closer but realistic monitoring and evaluation of the programme activities; identifying and maintaining focus on the major issues only so as to ensure the resources are not stretched too thin to make impact; and structuring the ambassador recruitment process to ensure that only those who meet the essential requirements are engaged. The librarians should also take time to explain the essence of knowledge ambassadorship to ensure a common understanding of what it entails.

## 6 Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal that knowledge ambassador programmes provide a “ba” conducive for tacit knowledge creation, validation, sharing and use in Kenyan universities. However, their impact is hampered by ideological, infrastructural and logistical challenges. The universities need to address these challenges using the recommendations above so as to leverage the impact of the programmes in facilitating the creation of unique tacit knowledge to increase their competitive advantage.

## 7 Implications of the Findings of the Study

The findings of this study can be used by universities to develop policies and action plans which leverage the operations and impact of knowledge ambassador programmes. The findings also underscore the value of peer education programmes in tacit knowledge management and can be used by librarians to develop information environments which are user-centric and promote collaboration in providing solutions to challenges hampering their impact. The findings may also be used by knowledge management professionals to develop theories and models on which knowledge ambassador programmes can be anchored.

### The Interview Guide

1. Describe the origins and concept of knowledge ambassadors

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2. How does the concept work in Kenya?

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3. Where has the concept been implemented in Kenya?

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4. What benefits have institutions implementing the concept accrued?

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5. What challenges hamper the effective use of the concept in Kenya?

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6. What strategies can academic institutions in Kenya use to enhance the effectiveness of knowledge ambassadors?

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7. Any other issue you'd like to add?

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