

# Ethical attitudes of practicing librarians and LIS academics : is there a difference?

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*“St. Kliment Ohridski” University of Sofia*

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# **Ethical Attitudes of Practicing Librarians and LIS Academics: Is There a Difference?**

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## **Етичните нагласи на практикуващите библиотекари и на университетските преподаватели по БИН: Има ли различия?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Professional ethics seems to be gaining importance as the library environment changes under the influence of new technologies and the introduction of new legislation of concern for libraries. The changing environment may create uneasiness among the library staff, who might not always be sure how to react in new situations. Therefore librarians should learn about ethical issues, and professional ethics has become a legitimate topic in both LIS curricula and professional training courses. It might seem that LIS educators will be the first to adopt the library ethics principles and live by them. But in fact they also belong to another professional community – the academic profession – which has its own values that may or may not correspond to the professional values of librarians. In times when the library profession is confronted with numerous challenges and when voices are raised that it should re-examine its position in the society, it is extremely important that LIS educators and practicing librarians share the same professional ethics. In order to understand the professional values of the LIS academic staff, an investigation of their ethical attitudes will be carried out. The investigation will be based on a specially developed questionnaire and an accompanying interview if needed. The results will be commented upon and compared to the results obtained in two earlier investigations on the ethical attitudes of practicing librarians which were carried out in 2002 and 2006. The aim of the paper is to find out if the whole library community in Croatia shares the same professional values.

**Keywords:** *LIS ethics; LIS education; Croatia*

### **РЕЗИЮМЕ**

С промяната на библиотечната среда, под въздействието на въвеждането на нови технологии и на ново библиотечно законодателство, нараства значението на библиотечната етика. Променящата се среда може да създаде чувство на неувереност у библиотечния персонал, който не винаги е сигурен как да реагира на новите ситуации. Затова библиотекарите трябва да изучават етични въпроси и професионалната етика трябва да стане легитимна тема в учебните програми по БИН и курсовете за професионално обучение. Може да се допусне, че преподавателите по БИН биха били първите, които ще

възприемат и спазват принципите на библиотечната етика. Но всъщност те принадлежат и към друга професионална общност – професията на университетските преподаватели, която има свои ценности, съответстващи или не на професионалните ценности на библиотекарите. Във време, когато библиотечната професия се сблъсква с многобройни предизвикателства и се надигат гласове, призоваващи към преоценка на нейната позиция в обществото, изключително важно е преподавателите по БИН и практикуващите библиотекари да споделят една и съща професионална етика. За да се установят професионалните ценности на университетските преподаватели по библиотечно-информационни науки, ще бъде проведено проучване на техните етични нагласи. То ще се основава на специално разработен въпросник и допълнително интервю, когато това се налага. Резултатите ще бъдат коментирани и сравнени с резултатите, получени от две предишни изследвания за етичните нагласи на практикуващите библиотекари, проведени през 2002 и 2006 година. Задачата на доклада е да установи, дали цялата библиотечна общност в Хърватия споделя едни и същи професионални ценности.

*Ключови думи: Етика на БИН; образование по БИН; Хърватия*

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## INTRODUCTION

Modern information technology has affected jobs and workplaces, homes, schools, universities and cultural institutions. It has influenced the business and government services, but also personal lives including recreation and amusement. Advances in information technology have also had a profound impact on library professionals. Technology has allowed librarians to establish and offer new services to users, and improve the quality of the services in an unprecedented manner, but the introduction of technology has not been accompanied by the appropriate set of guidelines which would possibly help a professional in his/her daily work and communication with users and colleagues. It is true that society provides at least a partial remedy by introducing legislation that is supposed to determine procedures and offer general guidance, but apart from the fact that legislation normally lags behind the new technology, it also cannot provide all answers needed in everyday routine. A need for a simple set of guidelines for appropriate behavior in the information technology environment seems to be the reason for opening a debate on information technology ethics in the early nineties. The debate started among computing professionals and soon spread to the library field (Cottrell, 1999).

For library professionals, information technology ethics is only a part of the professional ethics, because not all ethical issues with which a contemporary librarian has to deal today are related to information technology. Library experts seem to agree that ethics pervades almost every part of library work from cataloguing to preservation (Hauptman, 2002) and that even for the twenty-first century library professionals, the ethics of information technology is only a small part of information ethics (Fallis, 2007). Library professional values go back a long time and Gorman (2000), for instance, speaks of enduring values of librarians deeply embedded in their thinking and acting. Lester and Koehler (2003) believe that changes in the information environment have led to a new awareness of ethics, values, and responsibilities among the information professions. Fallis (2007) selects intellectual freedom, equitable access to information, information privacy, and intellectual property as the core issues of contemporary information ethics.

Library associations around the world have adopted ethical codes in order to guide their members in daily work. An exemplary selection of 34 codes adopted by national library associations can be seen on the IFLA/FAIFE webpage. In a recent study of national library associations' ethical codes, Koehler (2006) concludes that although library associations share a very similar set of values, there is a wide variation in their application, use, and enforcement.

Also information ethics has become an extensive and important topic in library education curricula, and has been taught at many LIS university departments in the world, either as a part of the course on library management or another topic, but also as a course on its own. At the Department of Information Sciences, University of Zagreb, ethical issues had first been incorporated in the library management course, in the mid nineties professional ethics was included in the new course on library legislation and standards, and was taught more extensively, while in 2005 it became a course on its own. The course has been well accepted by students and some of them enriched it significantly by telling the class about their own experience in libraries and writing essays on specific ethical issues. Information ethics has also been introduced as a refreshment course offered by the Centre for Continuing Education of Librarians in Zagreb where practicing librarians can update their knowledge.

## **BEGINNING RESEARCH ON PROFESSIONAL ETHICS**

Following the adoption of a new ethical code by the Croatian Library Association in 2002 (Eticki kodeksi), an analysis of the new code was prepared and a comparison with several new codes originating at approximately the same time in the neighboring countries of South-East Europe was made. The codes proved to be similar and emphasized the same values, but the author warned that there are values that had not yet become fully recognized by librarians in practice (Horvat, 2003).

Yet another investigation was conducted in 2005. Its aim was to determine the highest ranking professional values of librarians. The survey was a replica of several previous investigations conducted by Dole and Koehler in 2000 and 2001. A questionnaire similar to Koehler's but slightly changed and adapted to Croatian circumstances was developed and sent to libraries throughout the country. Around 400 librarians from various kinds of libraries responded. It appeared that the three highest ranking values of the respondents were free access to information, provision of services to users, and preservation of book heritage, not unlike Dole & Koehler's results. The same survey was simultaneously carried out in the Netherlands and the comparison of replies obtained by the Dutch and Croatian respondents was made (Horvat & Koren, 2006). The authors were careful not to draw any conclusions about the whole population of librarians in the country, because of difficulties in determining the random sample of respondents.

An investigation on a smaller scale was conducted in the autumn of 2006 (Belan-Simic et al., 2007). Respondents were attendants of the Croatian Library Association annual conference. The aim of the survey was not only to find out about the ethical attitudes of participants, but also to increase awareness of the ethical issues in general among librarians. By asking questions related to ethics a message was spread that professional behavior is important and that ethics pervades day-to-day routine. Questions included in the survey were often related to the real-life situations experienced by the authors or their colleagues in the academic community or in a library. Also students' experiences described in a class were used to formulate relevant questions, and a few hypothetical situations were taken over from professional literature. In the questions a brief description of a specific situation that could happen or did happen in real-life was provided, accompanied by several possible answers respondents could choose from. The results proved that if the real-life situation described in a question was familiar to respondents, they also knew how to react. But if they had never come across a described situation in their practice, they were not quite sure how to behave. This also might lead to the conclusion that practicing librarians do not regularly read new professional literature, and the authors recommended in the conclusion the introduction of professional ethics in education and training courses

## LIS ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

Library studies in Croatia were introduced relatively late to the university and not without opposition in the then academic circles who considered librarianship to be too practical to become an academic discipline. The concept of information science born in the sixties helped librarianship to join the academic club, but it also gave rise to a deep division in opinions on how the new discipline is to develop further. Differences in opinion have persisted to the present. For information science (IS) colleagues it is a single discipline whose strength is in research based on bibliometric studies, and more recently on computer linguistics studies. LIS staff believes that data collected in the daily work of libraries, archives and museums should be used in research in order to better understand and improve the tasks of those institutions which are not only information, but also cultural and educational institutions which at this very moment are struggling to redefine their role in the society. Also, teaching appears to be more important for them, since they believe that librarians should acquire knowledge about documents, users, management of libraries and information technology. One could imagine that the LIS academic community could be a strong (if not the strongest) supporter of libraries, archives and museums and could provide arguments needed for justifying those institutions to both the public and the government. But unfortunately, LIS educators seem to be detached from the practicing community, as is well proved by the fact that educators and practitioners often attend different professional meetings and are not members of the same professional associations. When, following the introduction of the Bologna process, new study programs were designed, LIS educators invoked academic freedom and university autonomy and did not find it necessary to consult with their colleagues from practice.

Another peculiarity of Croatian LIS education had to be taken into account when the questionnaire was designed. At present LIS studies are offered at three universities in the country: University of Zagreb (since 1977), University Josip Juraj Strossmayer in Osijek (since 1998) and University of Zadar (since 2003). At each university the LIS program is organized and executed within a single unit called department. However, the universities differ significantly, as regards the structure of departments and the qualifications of the teaching staff. The Department of Information Sciences, University of Zagreb is the oldest department of LIS in the country, and it offers programs not only for library science students but also for archivists, museum documentalists and future teachers of information science in secondary schools. Consequently, several disciplines are taught and researched at the LIS Department in Zagreb, gathered under a single name – informatology.

In our earlier papers we have concluded that professional ethics is at the core of professionalism, understood as the best-quality service that can be offered to clients. We wanted to find out if members of the LIS academic community share the same values as the practicing librarians and how they feel about their profession(s). The initial presumption was that LIS educators belong to the academic profession and live and work in an environment different from library environment. Daily experience confirms that LIS educators may have only sporadic connection with libraries, if they so wish; arrangements of students field practice or visits to libraries is probably the best occasion to approach colleague librarians. Library directors occasionally want to recruit a good student and then ask educators for advice. Students are often sent to do a small scale investigation or collect some data in libraries when they prepare their examinations. The presumption was also that those educators who are members of library association may have stronger relations with practicing field than the others.

Also, the LIS academic community in Croatia is rather small: the number of teaching staff including honorary lecturers does not surpass 70 persons; approximately half of them have been attached to the University of Zagreb, the others teach at universities in Osijek and Zadar. It is important to add here that LS (not IS) professors know each other well, since they meet at various professional meetings, collaborate in projects, etc.

## THE INVESTIGATION

From the very beginning the authors have been fully aware of the limits of the present investigation regarding the small sample of possible respondents, their expected reluctance to provide answers to personal questions, and the overall differences in their academic background and status, which would certainly need a more careful and detailed examination if any conclusions were to be drawn. However, a decision was made to pursue the investigation and possibly use it as a pilot inquiry for another research to be carried out later on. Since there has been little discussion in the LIS academic community on ethical issues and examples of unethical behavior of both teachers and students have been reported, it was felt that the investigation, however modest, might also serve as an enticement to colleagues to reflect upon day-to-day ethical issues in the academic environment and hopefully start expressing their opinion.

A relatively short and straightforward questionnaire was drafted in which a number of questions were taken over from the earlier investigation carried out among practicing librarians in 2006 (See Appendix 1). In order to entice more responses, the authors took good care to guarantee the anonymity of respondents and chose to create an online web questionnaire using Formdesk website forms, which offer various useful features, such as: auto responds by e-mail, statistics, results download, password protection, and secure data transfer. An e-mail message containing a link to the web questionnaire was sent to 67 addresses. The colleagues were simply asked to help and fill in a short questionnaire which would not take more than 10 minutes of their time. The authors signed their names at the bottom of the message assuming that their involvement in previous ethical investigations, the fact that they had been teaching information ethics for several years, and no less important, the fact that they were well known by the majority of respondents would be sufficient to elicit replies. Unfortunately, the assumption proved wrong and in spite of another e-mail reminder sent after a week, only 36 replies were received, barely enough to encourage the authors to go on. There is no doubt that professionalism includes good will to help colleagues, but we knew that there might have been plenty of other reasons for the weak recall, such as refusal to waste one's time, involvement in one's own work, etc. However, early in their investigation the authors understood that the questionnaire had attracted attention: they received e-mails with critical comments and communicated in person with colleagues. E-mails and comments received could easily be used in another investigation of academic communication and fellowship, also parts of the professional ethics.

## THE FINDINGS

Out of 36 respondents, 11 are assistant, associate or full professors, 19 are assistant lecturers or researchers, and 6 are part-time colleagues who help in teaching but are not employed by the university. Accordingly the majority of respondents (42%) have less than 10 years of working experience, 28% have 10 to 19 years of experience, and 30% have more than 20 years of experience.

<b>Academic position</b>	
Assistant professor, associate professor or professor	30.56%
Assistant lecturer or research assistant	52.78%
Other	16.67%

*Table 1: Academic position of respondents*

When asked about their profession (multiple answers were allowed), the majority (62%) see themselves as members of the academic profession, 53% are librarians, 39% belong to information profession, 5% are archivists and 5% choose museum profession. Other replies include computer science, conservation, philosophy, natural sciences, and the humanities. We

find it very indicative that a number of colleagues who feel as information professionals see themselves also as library/archive/museum professionals.

The majority of respondents (67%) are members of the Croatian Library Association, only 13% are members of the Croatian Information Association, others belong to various associations of computer scientists. It should be noted here that a number of respondents did not reply to that question, guiding us to believe that they are not members of any professional association.

Thirty-one percent of respondents selected the university ethical code as the most important professional document, while for an equally big group it was the library/archive code of ethics. It should be added here that 26% of respondents selected the statute of their institution as the most important document. A similar result was obtained in the 2006 investigation of the ethical attitudes of practicing librarians, where a significant number of respondents marked the statute of their library as the most important professional document. It seems that members of the academic community do not differ in this respect from their practicing counterparts. The statute is the legal document, which must be respected by all employees; ethical code obliges individual members of the profession. Is it true that some of our colleagues feel more as employees, and less as professionals?

The respondents were also asked to choose the most important ethical code. The majority of respondents (62%) chose the academic code of ethics, but 32 % selected library/archive/museum code of ethics as their first choice. The respondents were asked to evaluate their own knowledge of the provisions of the academic code of ethics. Thirty-nine percent respond that they are sufficiently familiar with the code, 36% believe they know the code well, 16% very well, and 8% evaluate their knowledge as excellent. When asked if non-compliance with the code of ethics should be sanctioned, 97% replied yes. This answer is in accordance with the results obtained by the practicing librarians in the 2006 survey. However, the result should be compared with the replies to the last two questions in the present questionnaire, where obvious breaches of ethics described would provoke colleagues to debate only but not to any action!

Asked if they spoke or wrote about cases of organizational or professional misconduct in their institution 72% of respondents replied negatively. This might indicate that there were no cases of misconduct, but it can also mean that there were cases of misconduct but the respondents chose to be silent. If the latter interpretation is correct, the silence of educators sounds an alarm.

<b>Have you ever spoken or written in public about professional/organizational misconduct in your institution?</b>	
Yes	27.78%
No	72.22%

*Table 2: Public action on misconduct*

The majority of respondents (42%) selected academic freedom as the highest value of the academic profession; it is interesting that an almost equal number of respondents (39%) chose freedom of research as their highest value. This is an interesting division of opinions which to our mind reflects the old dilemma about the university: is it primarily a teaching or a research institution? The decision to protect the anonymity of our respondents prevented us from confirming or refuting our assumption that the IS colleagues selected freedom of research. It is also interesting that a tiny 5% selected freedom of expression, although academic freedom and freedom of research are in fact only derivatives of freedom of expression.

<b>Highest value of the academic profession</b>	
Academic freedom	41.67%
Freedom of expression	5.56%
Freedom of research	38.89%
Other	13.89%

*Table 3: The highest value of the academic profession*

Sixty-one percent of respondents do not approve of the use of filters to protect viewing of inappropriate contents, 39% approve of it. The relatively high number of proponents of the use of filters among the members of the academic community appears worrisome, since the often used argument against the use of filters is that they represent an obstacle to freedom of expression. On the other hand, a relatively small number of respondents selected freedom of expression as their highest value in the previous question.

The respondents were then invited to describe how they would react in certain specific situations. First they were asked to imagine that they had been invited to a conference to deliver a presentation on a topic that did not belong to their field of research. Traditionally professors at Croatian universities used to be lifelong researchers in one field and normally taught courses related to that field. Hardly anyone would try to compete with them in that field. In the last ten years this tradition has been interrupted out of various reasons, and a number of colleagues were only happy to start teaching and researching new topics. Nevertheless judging by replies provided by the majority of our respondents, the tradition is still respected; 58% reply that they would forward the invitation to the colleague who is an expert in the topic of the conference; 30% would excuse themselves to the organizers, while only 11% would attend the conference.

The next question tried to explore the student/professor relationship. Traditionally professors could borrow a book from the library and keep it as long as they needed it. If the library had an only copy of a title, as it often was the case, and the copy was borrowed by a professor, students would have to turn to another library or individual to obtain the book. We wanted to know if the situation had changed. We asked the respondents if they would insist that a librarian lend them the only copy, although the student needed the same book and came to the library first. Sixty-six percent of respondents would not ask such favor from the librarian; only 23% would insist that they obtain the book.

The topic of privacy was also approached. We asked colleagues what they would do if a journalist inquiries about a student's marks. Fifty-six percent would refuse such a request, and 44% would direct the journalist to the university administration. The latter reply is in fact an evasive answer, because the responsibility is transferred to the others.

We were interested to learn if colleagues would try to check in the library what the students read. Only 5% would ask a librarian to confirm that students had indeed borrowed the books required for the course, while the majority (83%) would not do that.

If invited to a dinner by a student, 55% of respondents would refuse the invitation, 3% would accept it, while 42% reply that their reaction would depend on the occasion and the student. The ambiguity of such reply may guide us to believe that students are seen more as friends and colleagues and less as persons who could ask a favor in exchange.

Asked what they would do if required to hand over personal data about a student to a policeman with court order, only 3% of respondents would deliver data and do nothing afterwards, 84% would inform the university administration, while only 12% would inform the student about the policeman's visit. Again, a high percentage of respondents will try to transfer the responsibility to the administration.

Cases of plagiarism abound at universities and it has become extremely difficult for educators to identify the resource copied regarding the plenitude of Internet sources. Also, students have been warned against plagiarism rather late in their studies, at least such is the case at the Zagreb University. We asked the respondents what they would do when confronted with a student's paper where a substantial portion of another writer's text had been used without quotation. Ninety-two percent of respondents would warn the student, 8% would talk about the case at the staff meeting and request the common action of colleagues, but not one would report the case to the ethical committee. Again colleagues prefer to solve the critical issues in a direct discussion with the person involved or transfer the responsibility to a greater circle of persons, but refrain from direct action. In the case described the code of academic ethics has certainly been violated, but in spite of their belief that breaches of ethics should be sanctioned, colleagues hesitate to initiate the sanctioning process themselves.

Asked how they would react in the similar situation, in which a colleague educator was involved, 56% would talk to the colleague and warn her/him of what s/he had done, 5% would report the case at the staff meeting, 11% would do nothing, and no one would report the colleague to the ethical committee. However, 28% reply that their further action would depend on the kind of relationship they had with the colleague. The answer appears to be highly ambiguous, since ethical conduct, at least in this case should not depend on the type of relationship an individual has with another person

<b>You find out that your colleague copied out a part of another person's text without quotation. What would you do?</b>	
Talk to the colleague and warn her/him	55.56%
Report the case to the ethical committee	0%
Report the case at the staff meeting	5.56%
Depends on the relationship with the colleague	27.78%
Do nothing	11.11%

*Table 4: Action on plagiarism*

## CONCLUSION

The authors hope that in spite of its modest scope and low recall of replies this investigation of the ethical attitudes of Croatian LIS academic community could help initiate a more open talk on ethical issues among LIS educators. We have tried to find out how the educators feel about their profession(s), whether they are familiar with various codes of ethics and whether they accept the values outlined in those codes. We have assumed that basic professional values for LIS educators include protection of freedom of expression and related academic freedom, protection of privacy and respect for intellectual property.

The LIS academic community in Croatia seems to be divided into two categories; those who refuse to discuss ethical issues and those who accept to speak about it. This also means that the authors' initial assumption that the questionnaire should be anonymous was not correct: guaranteed anonymity of replies did not persuade a number of colleagues to respond, while the colleagues who decided to reply would have preferred to have been able to add comments and explain their replies more extensively, as some of them did by sending us e-mails or delivering personal comments.

Our concern is that LIS educators do not appear ready to accept responsibility but prefer to leave solving of certain issues to the university administration. From some of their replies one could conclude that they feel more as employees, and less as professionals, which they are. Some of the replies apparently contradict one another, and make any general conclusions difficult to formulate. Therefore, any future investigation should hopefully focus onto

more carefully selected points of interest. Topics that deserve a deeper exploration are: relationship between IS and LS educators concerning the difference in their attitude towards research and teaching and their involvement in professional associations. Also, relationships with both students and colleagues need a more careful examination.

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## APPENDIX

### The Questionnaire for LIS Educators

1. Academic position
  - a) assistant professor, associate professor or professor
  - b) assistant lecturer or research assistant
  - c) other
2. Years of working experience
  - a) 1-9
  - b) 10-19
  - c) 20 and more
3. What profession do you belong to? (multiple answers possible)
  - a) academic
  - b) information
  - c) library
  - d) archival
  - e) museum
  - f) other, please specify
4. Are you a member of a professional association? (multiple answers possible)
  - a) Association of university professors
  - b) Croatian Library Association
  - c) Croatian Information Association
  - d) Croatian Archivists Association
  - e) Croatian Museum Association
  - f) Other (please, specify)
5. The most important professional document is:
  - a) Code of Ethics of the university/faculty
  - b) Code of Ethics of your profession
  - c) University statute
  - d) Other, please specify
6. The most important code of ethics is:
  - a) University Code of Ethics
  - b) Faculty Code of Ethics
  - c) Library Association Code of Ethics
  - d) Code of Ethics of Archivists
  - e) ICOM Code of Ethics
  - f) Other, please specify
7. Your knowledge of the provisions of the University Code of Ethics is
  - a) excellent
  - b) very good
  - c) good
  - d) sufficient
  - e) not sufficient

8. Non-compliance with the Code of Ethics should be sanctioned?
  - a) yes
  - b) no
9. Have you ever spoken or written in public about professional/organizational misconduct in your institution?
  - a) yes
  - b) no
10. The highest value of the academic profession is:
  - a) academic freedom
  - b) freedom of expression
  - c) freedom of research
  - d) other, please specify
11. You have been invited to attend an international conference and present a paper on the topic your colleague is the expert in. What will you do?
  - a) excuse yourself to the organizer because you are not familiar with the topic
  - b) prepare a paper based on your colleague's contributions and attend the conference
  - c) persuade the colleague to attend the conference
12. Your library has acquired a new title of interest to you, but the book has already been reserved by a student. Will you request the librarian to lend the book to you?
  - a) yes, because you have a lecture to prepare
  - b) no, because the student requested the title earlier
  - c) no, because all really important information is on the web
  - d) do not know
13. Do you consider filters to be appropriate means of protection from inappropriate content, for children and youth in particular?
  - a) yes
  - b) no
14. A journalist requests personal data about a student. What will you do?
  - a) provide data
  - b) refuse to provide data
  - c) refer the journalist to the university administration
15. It appears that students do not read the recommended literature. What will you do?
  - a) request the librarian to provide you with data on the books borrowed by your students
  - b) try to ascertain at the examination if recommended literature had been read
  - c) will not do anything
16. You are a tutor of the student who invites you to a dinner. What will you do?
  - a) accept the invitation
  - b) refuse the invitation
  - c) depends on the occasion and the student
17. A policeman with a court order requests personal data about a student. What will you do?
  - a) provide data
  - b) provide data and notify the student
  - c) provide data and notify the university administration

18. You have discovered that your student copied other person's text without quotation. What will you do?

- a) tell the student this is unethical
- b) report the case to the Ethical Committee
- c) report the case at the teaching staff meeting and ask colleagues to advise you how to act further
- d) will not do anything

19. You have discovered that a colleague of yours used other author's text without quotation. What will you do?

- a) tell the colleague this is unacceptable
- b) report the case to the Ethical Committee
- c) report the case at the teaching staff meeting and ask colleagues to advise you on further action
- d) depends on the relations with the colleague
- e) will not do anything