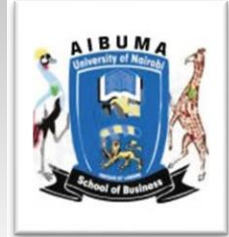




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THE USE OF ACADEMIC WRITING CONVENTIONS FOR PROPER REFERENCING AMONG POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS: A CASE OF KISII UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Readers expect academic writing to be clear, consistent and logically organized. As such conventions of academic writing such as referencing should be strictly adhered to. Referencing acknowledges the sources of the information presented and presents a defence from allegations of plagiarism. Equally, the conventions of citing & referencing allows readers to independently assess the quality of findings and conclusions in an academic piece based on its literature review. This paper discusses use and misuse of writing conventions i.e. 'and', ampersand (&) and 'et al.' in relation to referencing within post graduate theses of Kisii University. The study employed both quantitative and qualitative research design through a systematic review and descriptive survey sequentially. The systematic review quantitatively assessed thirty masters theses submitted to Kisii University for the award of degrees on how they employed the three conventions under study – 'and', ampersand sign (&) and 'et al'. Subsequently, a descriptive survey was utilized to examine the findings of the systematic review. This was done through interviews with the deans of the schools that were placed under study. The study found disparities in the use of the three conventions across the schools under review which were associated to poor staffing and lack of guidelines to strictly adhere to academic conventions. The study recommends continuous training & development for lecturers to ensure such conventions are adhered to.

Key words: *Ampersand, et al, convention, academic, writing, thesis.*

1.0 Background

Within the academic space, any audience would expect a writer to communicate research ideas, concepts and theories in a coherent written piece employing conventions of the academic genre. Contrary to informal communication either in emails, discussions or messaging, academic writing requires formality, precision, and conciseness (Bednar, 2015). The writing needs to follow a specific plan and therefore results in highly-structured text throughout an academic writing regardless of the use of explicit section labels or any other visible cues (Taylor, 2017). Such practices shape the construction of writing within various disciplines, institutions and interrelated systems. While building the construction of writing in academia, different disciplines often have specific ways to present their ideas and concepts.

Although structures may differ across different fields, they all aim at convincing the readers in the most comprehensive ways possible on the ideas that the writing presents (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018). These structures generally follow the 'Introduction – Body – Conclusion' format. Within the introduction, a writer initiates the discussion by presenting why they want to have that discussion. The body aims at persuading the readers through facts and relatively lengthier deliberations to believe in a certain idea. The conclusion on the other end restates of the main point so as not to leave readers confused about the research problem. It is important to have clarity in order to make convincing arguments and as such writers need to adhere to the rules and requirements set by the institution and the discipline to ensure

uniformity and avoid confusion. Unfortunately, many of these writing conventions are not strictly considered and are often understated (Bednar, 2015). Some of these rules have requirements that are demanding or even trivial; yet, poor organization, bad style, and bad grammar make it extremely difficult for one to communicate clearly any ideas they might be having in a professional manner. As a result, the implications are ominous and include limiting one's academic and professional advancement, taking longer to complete a study programme, and wasting time, money as well as effort in the event one is discontinued. To avoid any likelihood of being misunderstood, writers must always be aware to the fact that the audience comes from diverse disciplines, backgrounds and persuasions, hence, clarity is paramount.

In writing academic pieces, scholars often start off a study with examining the position taken by other researchers who have written works on their thematic focus. This literature review gives a basis of making a conclusion on a certain study. Scholars are required to quote what earlier scholars said and how one's findings differ or agree with the position taken by previous scholars. This goes a long way to demonstrate that the scholar made a background check, understood the concepts, and synthesized the issues from varying perspectives into one's own writing. Therefore, a differentiating factor between academic and other writing genres is the use of citations and referencing of published works – a pivotal tenet to academic writing (Hyland, 2008). The importance scholars attach on citing other authors in academic writing is reflected in the

elaborate referencing conventions developed within different disciplines, such as the Modern Language Association (MLA) formatting for the humanities or the American Psychological Association (APA) referencing system employed in psychology, education, and other social sciences (Bowker, 2007).

While these referencing styles are many and differ within disciplines and institutions, it is imperative to use the correct one and use one only throughout any writing. In most instances, inconsistencies within referencing are caused by a few variables including location of citation and the referencing style employed. Usually, writers locate citation in the body of discussions (in-text) and provide further details on how to locate the cited sources at the end of the works (Reference list). Sometimes, citations are also indicated in footnotes. The complex nature of the different referencing styles may cause confusion to some writers when undertaking referencing as well.

One simple, yet very important convention, in academic writing is the correct formatting of sources by two or more authors. Many times, many scholars contribute to one academic piece especially in books, book chapters and journal articles. This may look like a straight forward matter, however, in practice correct referencing of such pieces is far from consistent. In grammar the conjunction ‘and’ is used to connect two or more source authors. ‘And’ is sometimes used as ampersand (&) in specific cases after its adoption from the English and Latin systems (Hiskey, 2011). However, in academic writing, this takes three different operations—use of the term “and”, the

ampersand (&) – also known as the 27th letter of the alphabet, and ‘et al.’—the short form for et alia, the Latin phrase for “and others.”

In academic settings, the ‘and’ as well as the ampersand, are used as synonyms. However, et al. is used like the plural of the two. This technically means, *et al.*, is used to connect more than two authors and never two authors. For the APA referencing system, the word ‘and’ is always used in-text to connect two authors but without parenthesis; and never in the reference list. However, the ampersand sign, when located in-text, it must always be in parenthesis unlike, when used in the reference list—never in parenthesis. When used in-text, *et al.*, follows two traditions; first, for three and five authors, all of them must be cited initially and when required to cite them subsequently, then et al., is used. Second, et al., is employed in-text without initially citing the authors, on condition that there are six or more source authors. However, in the reference section, the writer must cite names of source authors unless they exceed seven. In case the source authors are more than, the writer can use et al., even at the reference list. All these conditions put together, tend to confuse even experienced writers. The objective for this study therefore, was to examine whether graduate students at Kisii University apply ‘and’, the *ampersand* (&) sign, and ‘et al.’, consistently throughout their writings. The study also examined whether there are improvements in the usage of these simple yet significant conventions.

2.0 Methodology

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative research design through a systematic review and descriptive survey

sequentially. The systematic review quantitatively assessed how graduate students employ three conventions of academic writing – ‘*and*’, *ampersand* sign (&) and ‘*et al.*’. Subsequently, a descriptive survey was utilized to examine the findings of the systematic review. It applied a cause and effect analysis to deduce reasons for the findings.

Thirty post graduate theses submitted to Kisii University for the award of Masters Degrees were analysed in the research. These theses were sampled methodically through purposeful and random sampling. Purposeful sampling was undertaken to select theses in the schools of Business & Economics (SOBE) and Education & Human Resource Development (SEDHURED) between 2014 and 2018. Three theses per year in each school covering the period under study were randomly sampled. The two schools i.e. SOBE & SEDHURED were chosen because both of them employ the APA referencing style in their academic discourse. The study considered a five year period between 2014 and 2018 to review any improvements in the writing over the course of time.

A systematic review of the theses was conducted by two PhD students who served as enumerators. This was done purposely, to expose, mentor and familiarise them on the usage of these conventions. Prior to the start of the exercise, the enumerators and one research assistant attended a two-day intensive training on the location of the conventions in question, their appropriate usage and the use of a recording tool. The training dealt with rules governing usage of the conventions, what to consider in deciding incidences of right or wrong usage of the

conventions and how to record the data. Each thesis was examined by both enumerators and the data was reviewed by the research assistant. Each enumerator was required to locate and count the total number of times the word ‘*and*’, the *ampersand* (&) and ‘*et al.*’, were used in relation to joining two or more cited source authors. After location, the enumerator recorded its context i.e. either In-Text or Reference section and whether the convention was correctly applied. The enumerators recorded and submitted the results of their independent findings to the research assistant. Where, the two reports differed, the research assistant re-examined the specific thesis in question and made a final decision. The data was sorted according to the schools and percentages were calculated for the sections in which the conventions appeared in. Analysis of the data was done via simple percentages applied to determine whether or not there was improvement in the usage of conventions.

To understand the causes of the findings that were realized in the systematic review, the study utilized a descriptive survey. In-depth interviews with the deans of the schools under review were undertaken using a cause and effect analysis of the results.

3.0 Results

The study surveyed 30 theses in a 5 year period (2014-2018) for Kisii university graduate students across disciplines and institutions which use the same referencing style. Table 1 summarises the observed use and misuse of the ‘*and*’ or ‘*ampersand*’ (&) in joining two source authors. The table shows the results of all the theses examined including all the sources cited and their uses

according to the usage of ‘*And*’ or *ampersand* (&) and highlights their distribution within the In Text and the bibliography section.

Table 1; Use and Misuse of the word 'and' or Ampersand (&) in linking two source authors

SNo	Year	School	Total References	In-text Citations		Bibliography References	
				Total In Text	Incorrect In Text	Total Bibliography	Incorrect Bibliography
1	2014	SEDHURED	72	12	5	18	4
2	2014	SEDHURED	68	30	11	17	1
3	2014	SEDHURED	99	32	6	28	0
4	2014	SOBE	110	36	16	50	38
5	2014	SOBE	60	10	3	20	9
6	2014	SOBE	78	48	3	35	10
7	2015	SEDHURED	77	29	2	18	3
8	2015	SEDHURED	34	3	3	9	3
9	2015	SEDHURED	62	15	2	17	8
10	2015	SOBE	112	38	18	51	41
11	2015	SOBE	70	11	4	24	11
12	2015	SOBE	81	49	4	27	0
13	2016	SEDHURED	79	39	8	69	8
14	2016	SEDHURED	77	32	0	20	1
15	2016	SEDHURED	92	48	11	53	1
16	2016	SOBE	87	59	29	69	18
17	2016	SOBE	71	39	22	35	0
18	2016	SOBE	86	46	24	65	20
19	2017	SEDHURED	91	20	1	32	6
20	2017	SEDHURED	84	18	8	19	4
21	2017	SEDHURED	98	26	4	20	0
22	2017	SOBE	106	14	3	60	4
23	2017	SOBE	39	21	12	23	9
24	2017	SOBE	93	18	16	24	2
25	2018	SEDHURED	61	19	0	9	0

26	2018	SEDHURED	85	16	6	25	2
27	2018	SEDHURED	75	24	2	19	1
28	2018	SOBE	112	50	22	26	7
29	2018	SOBE	72	11	4	27	0
30	2018	SOBE	25	2	2	16	1
			2356	815	251	925	212

The study observed various incorrect in-text application of the ‘and’ or ampersand’ (&) conventions in crediting two source authors by the graduate students. The most common incorrect in-text usage of the ampersand was when citing two source authors in the author prominent style and in parenthesis. It seemed that most students were unable to distinguish clearly when to use ‘and’ or ‘ampersand’ (&). Secondly, students tended to commit more in-text mistakes than they did in-

references. The mistakes made in the In Text referencing were equivalent to 31% (251/815) while those in the bibliography section were equivalent to 23% (212/925). This relates to an 8% difference between the mistakes made within the In Text Citations and the bibliography referencing. It is clear that more mistakes are made in referencing conventions within the In Text citations. Figure 1 shows the trend of inconsistencies in the usage of usage of the ‘and’ and the ‘ampersand’ by graduate students between 2014 and 2018

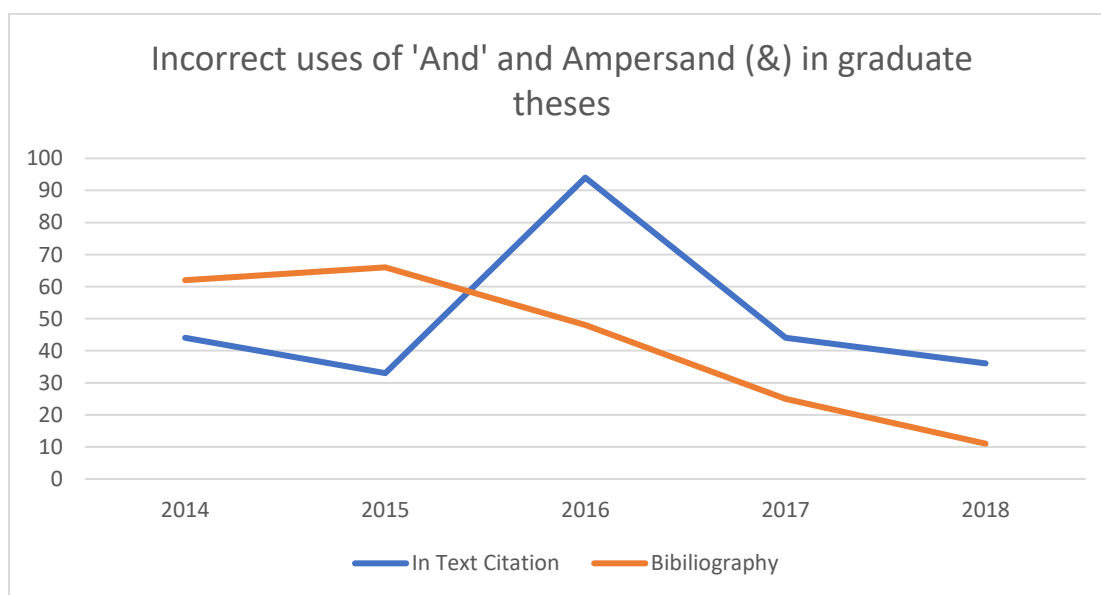


Fig. 1: Trend of incorrect uses of the ‘and’ and the ‘ampersand’ by graduate students.

The trend of incorrect use of the academic conventions in question over the years show a fluctuation in the differences that students cite from year to year. In 2014, the students made an average number of mistakes when citing in both In Text Citation. A consistent drop in misuse of the writing conventions from 2015 within the bibliography shows an indication of mastery in how students reference within the bibliography. On the other hand citation in the body of the theses began from an average low level in 2014 dropping in 2015 but drastically increases in 2016 after which is followed by a consistent drop in the wrong use of the citation

conventions. In both cases there is a decrease in misuse of the conventions in the last two years i.e. 2017 & 2018. These results are be associated to the effort that academic staff are making towards being keen on such conventions. By 2018, the university in question had developed guidelines on the proper use of academic conventions and had started strict adherence to these guidelines had been instituted. The university had also seen a rise in the number of academic staff which translated to more manpower to review these theses before submission for the award of degree.

Table 2

Use and Misuse of et al. in linking three or more source authors

SNo	Year	School	Total no. of sources cited	In Text		Bibliography	
				Total used	Incorrect Uses	Total Uses	Incorrect Uses
1	2014	SEDHURED	239	3	0	0	0
2		SOBE	248	0	0	0	0
3	2015	SEDHURED	173	25	11	0	0
4		SOBE	263	9	5	0	0
5	2016	SEDHURED	248	28	24	0	0
6		SOBE	244	14	4	0	0
7	2017	SEDHURED	273	44	33	2	1
8		SOBE	238	21	11	0	0
9	2018	SEDHURED	221	4	1	3	2
10		SOBE	209	7	2	0	0
			2356	155	91	5	3

Table 2 shows total number of use and misuse of ‘*et al.*’, meant to join three or more source authors in crediting the source across schools from 2014 – 2018. The table shows that majority of the ‘*et al.*’, convention usage was located at In-Text as compared to In-Reference. In total, ‘*et al.*’ was used 155 times in the In Text citation as compared to only 5 times in the Bibliography section. It is clear that students used ‘*et al.*’ to shorten the citation in the in text citation but preferred to use the reference with all the authors in the Bibliography .Common mistakes that were notices according to the conventional use of ‘*et al.*’ is wrong placement or omission thereof wholly from the reference list. This

happened — 4 times in 2015 and 2 times in 2017.

The study observed that one, most documents analysed employed the *et al.*, convention sparingly. Two, it would seem in most instances students employed the *et al.*, convention, the students got it wrong. Whereas the trend has been on the increase, students do not seem to have learnt their correct usage since the percentage of the wrong application has been on the rise. The results also suggest that SOBE was doing much better in the correct usage of ‘*et al.*’ as opposed to the use of ‘*and*’ and *ampersand* (&).

Table 3

Dispersion of the use and incorrect use of the three academic conventions per section i.e. In Text & Bibliography section.

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SE Mean	StDev
In Text Citations						
Total Use	30	2.00	59.00	32.33	2.79	15.28
Incorrect Use	30	0.00	29.00	11.40	1.43	7.82
Bibliography						
Total Use	30	9.00	69.00	31.00	3.20	17.55
Incorrect Use	30	0.00	41.00	7.17	1.86	10.17

Table 3 (below) depicts the measures of central tendency and variability in the dataset showing the use and incorrect use of the three academic conventions per section. The total

use of the three writing conventions within the In Text Citations (n=30) averaged 32.33 (s=15.28) during the period under study for postgraduate students in Kisii University.

The misuse of these conventions on the other hand averaged 11.40 ($s = 7.82$). This means that 35% the students got the conventions wrong 35% of the times they used them. On the other hand, the total use of the three writing conventions within the bibliography ($n=30$) averaged 31.00 ($s = 17.55$) as compared to the average 7.17 for the misuse

($s = 10.17$). This translates to a 23% incorrect use of the writing conventions. Some of the common mistakes that were realized in the incorrect use of these conventions within In Text citations were inconsistency in the use of the conventions, leaving out some authors when citing, improper use and lack of use thereof.

Table 4

Dispersion of the incorrect use of the three academic conventions per school i.e. SOBE & SEDHURED

Variable	School	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SE Mean	StDev
Incorrect Bibliography	SEDHURED	15	0.000	8.000	3.000	0.710	2.752
	SOBE	15	0.00	41.00	11.33	3.36	13.03
Incorrect In Text	SEDHURED	15	0.00	22.00	9.13	1.55	6.01
	SOBE	15	2.00	29.00	13.67	2.30	8.92

Table 4 shows a comparison of incorrect use of the three academic conventions per section according to the schools i.e. SOBE & SEDHURED depicting their measures of central tendency and variability. SEDHURED performed better than SOBE in the correct use the three conventions under study in all sections. The incorrect use of the three writing conventions within the Bibliography for the students in SEDHURED ($n=15$) averaged 3.00 with a maximum of 8 ($SD = 2.752$) during the period under study for postgraduate students in Kisii University.

This, compared with the performance of SOBE which averaged at 11.33 with a maximum of 41.00 ($SD = 13.03$) shows great disparity between the two schools. This is the same case with the incorrect citations observed in the In-Text citations which show compounded the difference i.e. an average of 9.13 for SEDHURED ($SD = 6.01$) as opposed to 13.67 for SOBE ($SD = 8.9$). Figure 2 below is a graphical representation of the incorrect use of the conventions under study across the years.

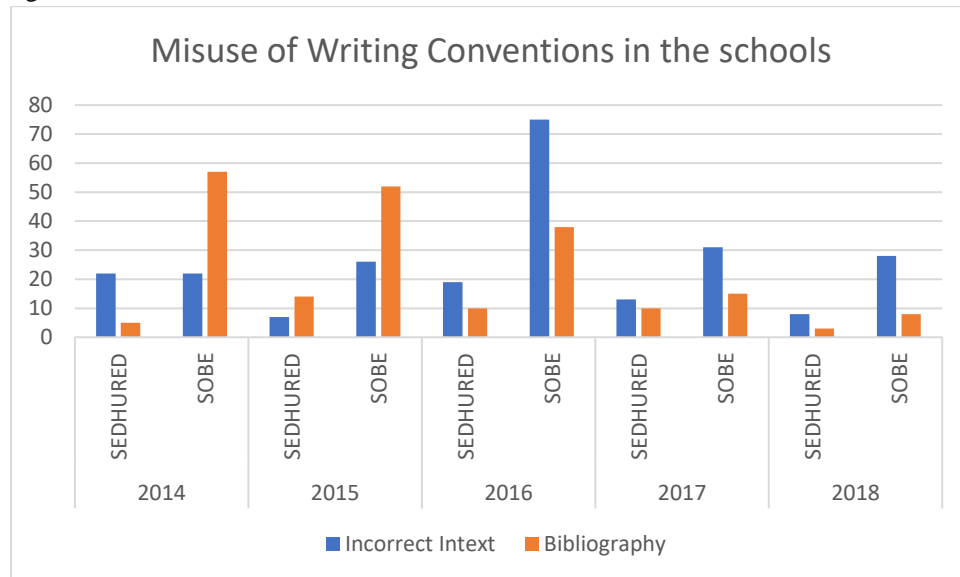


Fig. 2: Misuse of the ‘and’ and the ‘ampersand’ conventions by graduate students according to their schools.

In comparison, students from the school of Business made generally more mistakes in both the In-Text citations and referencing in the bibliography across all the years. It is clear that the students in the School of Education are way ahead of their Business & Economics counterparts in the proper use of these referencing conventions. The dean of Business & Economics relates the poor performance of the school to lesser staff members and the years of existence of the school as compared to the School of Education.

Interview schedules

The results between the two schools necessitated an inquiry to respond to the disparities in the writing conventions. The deans of the schools under study were interviewed to ascertain the inconsistency in the performance of their schools. The interviews followed a cause and effect analysis to deduce reasons for the findings of

the study. While there was a decline in misuse of the conventions – ‘And’, Ampersand (&) and ‘et al.’ generally across the years, the interviews sought to find the issues underlying poor performance in certain years and that of SOBE across all years. From the interviews, the key issues that were identified were poor staffing, lack of knowledge on proper citing, lack of proper guidelines and unavailability of referencing manuals in the university.

Poor staffing across all schools was noted to be a great contributor of the high percentages in misuse of academic writing conventions. The number of staff in the university was quite low as the university was in its formative years. The available staff were also not privy to proper training on the use of these academic conventions. The dean of SOBE noted that:

“In 2014 to 2016, the university had many students and very few lecturers.

The lecturers were overwhelmed by the workload in supervising postgraduate students and teaching and did not have time to do properly mentor the students. Needless to say, the staff also need continuous training which was not undertaken constantly because the university was focussed on developing other priority areas.”

On poor staffing and lack of training, the dean of SEDHURED said that:

“While the university had just been awarded its charter, the department of education had been around dating to the late sixties and therefore the structures of the school were better than the rest. The school also had slightly more staff than others and this led to better performance of the school. However, the lecturers still need continuous training to ensure all conventions are followed”

University guidelines are important in providing direction for strict adherence of writing conventions. The university also needs to have access to up-to-date referencing manuals to ensure that students are well versed with the conventions. When asked why students do not follow the guidelines and manuals for conventional writing, the dean of SOBE responded:

“In the year 2014/5, there were no clear guidelines directing the process of thesis writing in the university and therefore lecturers depended on their prior knowledge and there were no trainings and refresher courses administered. On the issue of low use

of ‘et al.’, students easily use journals and publications that only have one author and sometimes they ignore the rest. Supervisions was also not very strict on the conventions under review.”

The dean of SEDHURED said that;

“The school has always embraced co-ordination and peer support in the academic writing process. We also go a step further to ensure that a student is supervised by lecturers in the same area as the research. We also continuously encourage flexibility in consultation”

4.0 Discussions

In academic writing, the conventions ‘and’ or the ampersand (&) sign are employed to join between two and five source authors while crediting them. It is important that their usage is done well so as to give confidence to the audience that the writer understands what he or she is communicating since it is done in the familiar language of the discipline ‘community’. Misuse of the rules lowers the writer’s esteem within the discipline community. Postgraduate students are the upcoming members of their respective discipline communities and are expected to learn the way their respective academic communities communicate.

The study observed that students have a hard time distinguishing when to employ ‘and’ or the ampersand (&). The rule is simple, In-Text, ‘and’ is employed only when using the author prominent style (Bottomley & Pryjmachuk, 2017), as in:

'According to Nyamwange and Nyamwange (2015), or Nyamwange and Nyamwange (2015) assert that ...'

We need to note that *'and'* only joins source authors in an author prominent style, In-Text. Here, the authors are given prominence and therefore the year of publication is put in bracket. The concern for the writer is who said what was said. If in the opinion of the writer, what was said is what matters most, then the information can be rendered in an information prominent style, as in:

'Mental health problems in the general population frequently start in adolescence (Nyamwange & Nyamwange, 2015).'

Notice, in this type of sentence construction, it is the information which is placed at a prominent place, while the authors though important are placed in parenthesis and at the end of the sentence. Also notice that the ampersand sign is used to connect the source authors instead of *'and'* (Mligo, 2017). This is import for both the writer and the reader.

In the referencing section, joining two source authors is treated differently. First, *'and'* is never used at the In-References section; two, the authors are never placed in parenthesis; and three, the ampersand sign is used to connect two source authors (Hubbuch, 2005). Lastly, *'and'* or the *ampersand (&)* are used to join two source authors only. Otherwise, if there are more than two source authors to be joined, that requires a different treatment. Next, the study observed that students tended to commit more mistakes at In-Text in the use conventions of than they

did at the In-References/Bibliography section.

As noted above, the rules in the use of *'and'* or *ampersand (&)* sign change depending on the emphasis put on either author or information. The change in style is what makes communication meaningful. Also, writers normally employ *'and'* or *'the ampersand (&)* sign more in the In-Text while discussing the subject compared to In-Reference while listing the references consulted. This is because in discussing writers, there is a higher likelihood of quoting the same author more than once unlike while listing the consulted sources. Therefore, Table 2 tends to suggest that some students listed sources that may have been consulted but not cited. This is against, the academic procedure that requires only sources cited to be listed.

In addition, the study observed that students made some mistakes, which could not be captured within the two tables. Examples of the mistakes noted were the use of *'and'* in place of a separator between sources as in:

(Nyamwange and Nyamwange (2015) and Osoro (2016)).

Certainly, there are two correct ways of capturing this, depending on the style employed. If, the style preferred is information prominent, the correct way of stating it is:

(Nyamwange & Nyamwange, 2015; Osoro, 2016);

placed after quoting the author's words or ideas. However, if the style adopted is author prominent, the correct way of saying it is:

According to Nyamwange and Nyamwange (2015) and Osoro (2016)

Notice, when citing a source co-authored by two to five individuals, you require the use of the ampersand sign In-Text, if the style is information prominent or when listing the source In-Reference.

While analysing the use of et al., two important observations were made. First, that most documents analysed employed the et al., convention sparingly. We doubt whether this was coincidence or tactical. We doubt the coincidence as current practice shows that most studies are authored by many individuals. Whatever may be the case, instructors should encourage variety to allow students gain appropriate skills. The second observation that the study made in relation to the use of et al., in academic writing was that seemed that in most of the instances that students employed the et al., convention, they got it wrong.

5.0 Conclusions & Recommendations

The study has shown clearly that academic conventions are not well followed in many post graduate theses though the mistakes seem to be gradually declining. It should be clear that rules in the use of 'and' or ampersand sign change depending on the emphasis put on either author or information. The change in style is what makes communication meaningful. The study observed that students have a hard time distinguishing when to employ 'and' or the *ampersand* (&). The rule is simple, In-Text, 'and' is employed only when using the author prominent style. Many students also tended to commit more in-text mistakes than they did in-references. The inconsistencies could

be tied to a myriad of issues including poor staffing, lack of experience but most importantly lack of guidelines and strict adherence to academic conventions.

The author recommends that faculty members need to take student through this area of conventional writing in writing their works of research. The students should do thorough practice on how to use the ampersand and et al consistently. More practice to be committed in conventional writing as many students tended to commit more in-text mistakes than they did in-references.

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