

Case study 5. It can't be me

A hypothetical case about fraud

Eric received an email from the Faculty concerning an experiment he supposedly participated in. According to the email, his name and contact were present in their record. The research supervisor wrote to confirm if the record was accurate. Eric did not recall participating in any experiment similar to what was described in the email. What's more, he couldn't be part of that study as he went on exchange during that time. In the email he received, a reimbursement receipt with his "signature" was attached.

Eric remembered that he filled out a questionnaire for his friend Mike once, but he wasn't involved in any of Mike's experiments and didn't recognise that signature at all. "Could it be that Mike used my name to make up the record? If that was the case, should I tell his supervisor the truth?" He decided to ask Mike about this before replying to the email. Mike admitted forging Eric's signature immediately and asked Eric to help him cover up his wrongdoings. This put Eric in a dilemma: he was furious for what Mike did, but he did not want to lose a friend. "If I reported the truth, Mike might end up being punished...or should I ask him to turn himself in?"

Reflection corner

1. Is this a case of fraud?
2. In what circumstances is signing on another person's behalf allowed?
3. What would you do in this situation if you were Eric?

Analysis: The intertwined relationship between fraud, forgery, and fabrication

Fraud and forgery are both legally punishable crimes. Some people may not be, however, aware of the seriousness of these offences, of committing fraud or forgery while conducting research. In some cases, people who committed data fabrication may also be tempted to forge participant records along with the signatures required as cover-ups. If subject payments are also involved, this could constitute an act of fraud. Under the provisions of Statute XXXI of the University of Hong Kong Ordinance, "theft, fraud, misapplication of University funds or property of any kind"; "false pretences, misrepresentation, fraud or personation of others, within or without the University, in connection with academic attainments or financial awards, or otherwise in connection with the University" shall be investigated by the Disciplinary Committee.

See more:

1. Statutes of the University of Hong Kong:
<https://calendar.hku.hk/university-ordinance-and-statutes/>
2. Information on research integrity, HKU Graduate School:
https://gradsch.hku.hk/current_students/research_integrity