The New Educational Review

Francisco Esteban, Maria Rosa Buxarrais, Teodor Mellen
Spain

What do University Teachers Think about the Teaching in Ethics and Citizenship in the European Higher Education Area?

Abstract

Ethics and citizenship education has become the focus of considerable debate since the construction of the European Higher Education Area. That this should be so is interesting, as it is a type of education that forms part of the educational mission of the university, as its history plainly demonstrates. Ethics and citizenship education cannot be analyzed solely in terms of its pedagogical requirements, the competences that it seeks to develop, or the type of students and professionals that the world needs today. Its success also requires our exploring what university teachers understand by this type of education, the situation it currently finds itself in, and how students perceive such an education. This paper presents a case study conducted among university teachers of education, philosophy and the humanities at several European institutions.

1. Introduction

The creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) corroborates that university teaching today is very much seen in terms of skills or competences (European Council, 1996; 2007; European University Association, 2007; 2010). It is no longer solely a matter of students acquiring theoretical knowledge and technical skills, but also of demonstrating that they are competent in their management and application. What is more, there is a rich diversity of competences, among which we find those of an ethical, moral and civic nature (González y Wagenaar, 2003). Ethics and citizenship education at university has become a subject of concern, even at

the level of university policy-making and management (European Commission, 1995; OECD, 1997). Among the many possible ways of analyzing this question, we are interested here in examining the thinking of university teachers themselves regarding the teaching of ethics and citizenship.

This dimension is of interest as the thinking of university teachers conditions, in good measure, what eventually occurs when teachers and students come together, i.e. pedagogical thinking underpins pedagogical practice. The aim of this study is to present information that might illustrate what university teachers, working in departments of education, philosophy and the humanities at several European universities think about certain aspects of ethics and citizenship education at university.

2. A Theoretical Framework: Ethics and citizenship education at university

The classical references examining the idea and mission of the university (Bonvecchio, 1980; Wyatt, 1990; Rüegg, 1992) as well as more recent studies (Kerr, 2001; Scott, 2006; Laredo, 2007) mention, in one way or another, ethical and citizenship education at university.

This interest shows that we are not dealing with a merely *decorative* matter, but rather one of considerable substance. However, ethics and citizenship education can be approached in many ways. In broad terms, these versions can be classified in three groups.

2.1. Three versions of ethics and citizenship education at university

The first of the versions we wish to refer to is one that states that ethics and citizenship education has no place at university. On the other hand, defenders of this version, not unreasonably, point out that the line that separates ethics and citizenship education from indoctrination is too fine. Writers such as Derek Bok warn of the dangers inherent in the thinking of the likes of Henry Giroux who argue in favor of critical pedagogy (Bok, 2007; Giroux, 2007). At most, and in the face of any ethical or moral question, this version argues in favor of adopting a neutral stance.

This version cannot be ignored, but its stance presents a number of weaknesses. Today, perhaps more than ever, and because of the rise of individualism (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992) and the indifference expressed by all too many young people towards political and social institutions (Saha, Print & Edwards, 2007; Duke, 2008),

we need a European university that supports the ethical and moral education of young professionals as they face the challenges of reality (Steiner, 2004).

The second version is one which considers an education in ethics and for citizenship as being an education in the great questions that concern us today, and which require ethical and civic responses. For this reason, university students should develop their moral reasoning to the full (Kohlberg 1981; 1984). Justice, equality, sustainability, equality of the sexes and multiculturalism, among others, are therefore suitable subjects for inclusion in ethics and citizenship education when seen in this light. Today, it is difficult to find a university that does not include these matters in its statute or mission statement.

However, this might well be an incomplete version of an education in ethics and citizenship. The reality of the present day shows that while most students know that certain moral and ethical standards are expected of them, they do not always display them (Moore, 2008).

The third, and final, version is one which considers ethics and citizenship education as an education of ethical nature (Lapsley & Clark, 2005; Nucci y Narváez, 2008) and, as such, it is centered on activating a series of habits and attaining certain ethical virtues. In this case, ethics and citizenship education at university can be seen as the conquest of certain virtues, which undoubtedly form part of a competent behaviour. It is worth stressing once more that the nature of the encounters between teachers and students acquires considerable importance, as this acquisition requires a certain sense of narrative (MacIntyre, 1984). An education in ethics and for citizenship at university should foster the shaping of solid characters that can resist the assaults of the present-day professional and social reality that tends, as has been noted by some, to corrupt (Sennet, 1998).

3. Study

The study presented here forms part of a research project aimed at examining the thinking of university teachers from the fields of education, philosophy and the humanities about ethics and citizenship education at university. A total of 89 teachers took part in the study, of whom 33.7% were male and 66.3% female; 74.2% worked in university departments of education, 19.1% in the humanities and 6.7% in philosophy; 49.4% had fewer than 15 years of teaching experience while 50.6% had 15 or more years of experience. The teachers belonged to six universities in four European countries, distributed as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Teachers participating in the study according to their university of origin

	Total	(%)
South European Universities (SEUs)	**59**	**66.3**
Universitat de Barcelona	30	33.7
Universidade de Lisboa (Portugal)	12	13.5
Universidade do Minho (Portugal)	9	10.1
Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro (Portugal)	8	9.0
North European Universities (NEUs)	**30**	**33.7**
University of Humanistic Studies (Holland)	21	23.6
University of Helsinki (Finland)	9	10.1
Total	89	100.0

Based on the sample of teachers, two groups were created according to the geographical location of the universities in which the participants worked. Methodologically, this classification served, on the one hand, to group the opinions of the university teachers from similar backgrounds regarding teaching in ethics and for citizenship at university; and, on the other, to increase the statistical significance and validity of the results.

Data were collected using a self-administered, on-line questionnaire from among a random selection of the teachers working at the universities listed above. The survey comprised both open-ended and closed (Likert-scale) questions. The results discussed below correspond to five items which seek to give a response to: the role given to the teachers, if indeed they are given one, in ethics and citizenship education at university (1); how the teachers think students view the university in general and in relation to this type of education (2); whether they believe the university in which they work seeks to promote this kind of education, how it does so and to what degree (3); the difficulties they encounter in promoting an education in ethics (4); and, finally, how they go about implementing teaching of this nature (5).

In the data presented below, specifically those that compare the NEUs and the SEUs, and the factors of gender and teaching experience, the percentage figures that are statistically significant at levels of probability corresponding to 0.05, 0.01 and 0.001 are indicated with one (*), two (**) or three (***) asterisks, respectively. All the calculations were conducted using the statistical program PASW Statistics 18.0.

4. Results

In relation to the question as to whether the university should be responsible for the ethical education of its students and for providing them with an education for citizenship (item 1), we find that the large majority of the teachers believe that it should (94.4%). More specifically, the large majority think that one of the missions of the university involves contributing to the full development of the student (97.6%), in teaching the ethical codes of each profession (92.9%), and in contributing to the building of a more just society (95.2%). In their responses to this last item we found significant differences between the teachers of the SEUs (98.2%**) and those of the NEUs (89.7%**); however, the interviewees did not vary in their responses to item 2 in terms of gender. If, however, teaching experience was taken into consideration, differences were observed: 97.7%* of the teachers with 15 or more years of experience stated that university education should include instruction in the ethical codes of each profession compared to 87.8%* of their colleagues with fewer than 15 years of teaching experience.

In relation to the question examining the teachers' perspectives of their students' expectations of university (item 2), it should be highlighted that the large majority believe their students see the university primarily as a place in which they can obtain professional qualifications (92.1%) and in which they can acquire a high level of scientific and cultural knowledge (82.0%), as opposed to seeing it as an institution with a social dimension and/or one that is committed to the community to which it belongs (42.7%) or an institution that is going to educate them in ethics and citizenship (34.8%). Moreover, the teachers with fewer than 15 years of teaching experience believe more strongly (54.5%*) that their students perceive the university as an institution with a social dimension and/or a commitment to the community than their more experienced colleagues (31.1%*).

However, in relation to this question, the most significant differences occur between the teachers of the SEUs and those of the NEUs. Thus, only 18.6%*** of the SEU teachers believe that their students are aware that they are to be educated in ethics and citizenship, while this figure is 3.5 times higher (66.7%***) among the NEU teachers.

In relation to whether the university actually promotes ethics and citizenship education for its students (item 3), and the difficulties they encounter in promoting this kind of education (item 4), significant differences were found between the responses of the teachers of the NEUs and those of the SEU. Thus, while only 35.6%** of the teachers of the SEUs recognize that an education in ethics and citizenship is one of the objectives of their institutions, and that it is included in

Table 2. Various items highlighting the differences in perceptions of teachers at the SEUs and NEUs (degree of agreement) (%)

	Mean	Type of University		p value
		SEU	NEU	
The university should offer its students ethics and citizenship education.	95.2	98.2	89.7	0.081
For the students, university is an institution that is going to educate them in ethics and citizenship.	34.8	18.6	66.7	0.000
For the students, university is an institution with a social dimension and/or commitment to the community to which it belongs.	42.7	35.6	56.7	0.049
Ethics and citizenship education is included in the statutes (or mission statements) as an aim to be achieved.	49.4	35.6	76.7	0.001
Ethics and citizenship education is included in the university curricula in the form of competences.	51.7	40.3	73.3	0.014

their statutes (or mission statement), the proportion reaches 76.6%** of the NEU teachers. A further difference as regards institutional recognition was found in response to the question as to whether ethical and citizenship skills are included in university curricula. Here, 73.3%** of the NEU teachers claim that they are included, while only 40.7%** of the SEU teachers could make a similar claim.

Moreover, for the SEU teachers (39.0%*) this is a subject that is discussed but not one that is put into practice, compared to 20.0%* of the NEU teachers who think similarly. The teachers working at the SEUs (39.0%***) also think that it is a personal and controversial matter on which it is difficult to reach an agreement as to what kind of moral and civic education should be promoted, a view shared by just 6.7%*** of those working in the NEUs. Finally, the teachers of the SEUs (54.2%***), compared to 10.0%*** of their NEU counterparts, are the ones more likely to consider that, at their universities, education in ethics and citizenship is not given the importance it deserves because it has no academic consequences for either the teaching staff or the students.

It is also worth stressing the differences between the NEU and SEU teachers when assessing whether an ethics and citizenship education promotes university life beyond merely academic issues: more than half of the NEU teachers (53.3%*) believe this to be the case, compared to just over a third of their SEU counterparts (35.6%*).

In response to the question as to how the teachers handle the teaching of ethics and citizenship with their students (item 5), we find a fairly high degree of commitment to the subject as regards certain aspects. A high percentage of the teachers

Table 3. Difficulties in promoting an ethics and citizenship education among students (degree of agreement) (%)

	Mean	Type of university		p value
		SEU	NEU	
It is a subject that is discussed, but not one that is put into practice.	32.6	39.0	20.0	0.049
It is a personal and controversial matter.	28.1	39.0	6.7	0.001
It is a difficult subject to assess.	59.6	64.4	50.0	0.271
It is a subject with no academic consequences.	39.3	54.2	10.0	0.000

interviewed (61.9%) claim to incorporate moral and civic skills into their courses, as well as elements of the contents of ethics and citizenship education (67.9%). Similarly, a fairly high proportion claim that they seek to stimulate students' learning in this field (65.5%), be it via dialogue (90.5%), by incorporating and examining different points of view on questions of ethics and citizenship (84.5%), by promoting such virtues as effort, participation and punctuality (65.5%), or by sharing their own points of view with the students on questions of ethics and citizenship (58.3%). In addition, the teachers with 15 or more years of experience claim they are more likely to promote dialogic learning in class (97.7%*), and to take into account different ethical and moral points of view that might emerge (88.4%*). However, despite the above, the SEU teachers (74.5%*) score higher than their NEU counterparts (48.3%*) when it comes to promoting the practice of ethical virtues such as effort, respect, punctuality, participation, etc.

However, overall, these scores fall markedly when the teachers are asked if they assess their students' knowledge (36.9%), skills (36.9%), and attitudes (34.5%) in ethics and citizenship. Here, the most significant differences occur between the teachers according to their experience. Thus, the teachers with fewer than 15 years of teaching experience claim to have fewer problems in evaluating students' knowledge (39.0%**) and skills (46.3%**) in ethics and citizenship.

5. Conclusions

The data reported above allow for drawing a number of interesting conclusions. The first is related to the fact that the majority of those interviewed consider university education to constitute an education in ethics and citizenship as well. Clearly, the fact that our interviewees work in fields of study closely linked to

questions of ethics and citizenship may well have affected those findings, but it is nevertheless of interest that we have not encountered the first of the versions discussed above in the theoretical framework of this paper.

The second conclusion concerns the conception of ethics and citizenship education that the teachers attribute to their students. Despite the fact that they believe their students appreciate this form of education in its various forms, the majority of the teachers claim that they see university primarily as a place in which to obtain professional qualifications. Here, it is worth stressing that the NEU teachers are more optimistic than their counterparts at the SEUs, a fact that, as we argue in the fourth conclusion, has positive consequences. Yet, be this as it may, in the eyes of the teachers, the students expect the university to provide them with professional training much more than they expect personal training in ethics and citizenship. We believe that this finding might be much more marked in other areas of knowledge that are not as vocational as those studied here.

Thirdly, regarding the recognition and promotion of the ethics and citizenship education from within the universities themselves, there emerged significant differences between the NEUs and SEUs. The teachers at the former claim their universities are strongly committed to questions of ethics, whereas their colleagues at the SEUs are more pessimistic in this regard. This belief takes into consideration the inclusion of an ethical education in the official statutes of the university and even its inclusion in the university curricula. In this regard, the universities of the north and south of Europe differ notably, and it would be interesting to explore why, as the consequences are clearly important. We venture to suggest that the SEUs should do more to promote their institutional support for an ethics and citizenship education, so as to reach the level of recognition afforded by the NEU teachers. As noted in the theoretical discussion, and in relation to the second version of an ethical education, making declarations and stating intentions in official and academic documents is insufficient.

Continuing with this line of thinking, a fourth conclusion can be drawn. The teachers of the SEUs also seem more pessimistic when it comes to promoting the ethical and moral education of their students. Their perception of the possible obstacles that might impede the implementation of this education is more marked than that of their colleagues at the NEUs. However, it is somewhat surprising that the SEU teachers are more likely to promote such virtues as effort, respect, punctuality and participation than are their NEU colleagues. This result, which seems to contradict the situation described above, makes us conclude that the need of the students enrolled at the NEUs to be exposed to the promotion of these virtues is not as great as it is among their SEU peers.

The fifth and final conclusion, but by no means the least important, is that the assessment of an ethics and citizenship education seems to be one of the teachers' Achilles' heels. Most of the teachers report that they do not evaluate their students on such matters, either because of a lack of training, the difficulty in identifying evidence in this field or because of the little academic weight attached to it. Yet, any form of education that goes unevaluated is at the very least an incomplete form of education, as argued in the third of the versions presented in the theoretical framework. To ensure that the subject is afforded the importance it deserves we believe that it is necessary to further our understanding of the assessment tools available for the ethics and citizenship education at university, and above all, that its results are given proper academic weighting.

The above discussion should be borne in mind, if what is sought is the creation of a genuine European university area, as opposed to the juxtaposition of different university institutions and systems. However, unlike their SEU counterparts, the teachers at the NEUs feel in receipt of greater support from their institutions, and also more optimistic as regards what their students expect of university, a fact, as we have pointed out, that results in the implementation of ethics and citizenship education. This situation that prevails among the NEUs favors the combination of the second and third versions outlined in the theoretical framework, a situation that, to my way of thinking, should be considered by the SEUs, so that we might create the EHEA that Europe in the twenty-first century requires.

References

Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity: Theory, Culture and Society*. London: Sage.

Bok, D. (2007). *Our Underachieving Colleges*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Bonvecchio, C. (Ed.) (1980). *Il mitto dell'universitá.* Bologna: Nicola Zanichelli.

Duke, C. (2008). University Engagement: Avoidable Confusion and Inescapable Contradiction. *Higher Education Management and Policy,* 20, 1–11.

European Commission, (1995). *White paper on Education and Training. Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society.* COM (95) 590. Brussels: European Commission.

European Council, (1996). White Paper: Conclusions on the "Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society", number 3 (96/C, 195/01, in OJEC 6.VII.1996).

European Council, (2007). On the new skills for new jobs. *Official Journal of the European Union.* 2007/C 290/01. Brussels: European Commission. . http://www.eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2007:290:0001:0003:EN:PDF .Accessed 4 February 2013.

European University Association, (2007). *Trends V: Universities shaping the European Higher Education Area,* by D. Crosier, L. Purser & H. Smidt. Brussels: EUA. http://www.eua.be/publications/ .Accessed 4 February 2013.

European University Association, (2010) *Trends VI: A decade of change in European Higher Education,* by A. Sursock y H. Smidt. Brussels: EUA. http://www.eua.be/publications/ .Accessed 4 February 2013.

Giddens, A. (1991). Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. London: Polity.

Giroux, H. "Academic repression in the first person". *The advocate, February, 2007, 1*

González, J. y Wagenaar, R. (Eds.). (2003). *Tuning Educational Structures in Europe. Final Report. Phase One.* Bilbao: Universidad de Deusto.

Kerr, C. (2001). *The Uses of the University.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Kohlberg, L. (1981). *The Meaning and Measurement of Moral Development.* Worcester, MA: Clark University Press.

Kohlberg, L. (1984). *Essays on Moral Development. The Psychology of Moral Development*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Laredo, P. (2007). Revisiting the third mission of universities: Toward a renewed categorization of university activities?. *Higher Education Policy,* 20(4), 441–456.

Lapsley, D. y Clark, F. (2005). *Character Psychology and Character Education*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

MacIntyre, A (1984). *Tras la virtud.* Barcelona : Editorial Crítica

Moore, S. (2008). Practical approaches to ethics for Colleges and Universities, *New Directions for Higher Education,* 142.

Nucci, L. & Narváez, D. (2008). Handbook of Moral and Character Education. New York: Routledge.

OECD, (1997). *DeSeCo Project. Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations.* Paris: OECD.

Rüegg, W. (1992). *A History of the University in Europe.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Saha, J.L., Print, M., y Edwards, K. (Eds). (2007). *Youth and Political Participation.* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Sennet, R. (1998). *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work.* New York: W.W. Norton y Company.

Scott, J. (2006). The Mission of the University: Medieval to Postmodern Transformations, *The Journal of Higher Education,* 77(1), 1–39.

Steiner, G. (2004). *The Idea of Europe.* Tilburg: Uitgeverij Nexus.

Wyatt, J. (1990). *Commitment to Higher Education. Seven West European Thinkers on the Essence of the University. Max Horkeimer, Karl Jaspers, F.R. Leavis, John Herny Newman José Ortega y Gasset, Paul Tillich, Miguel de Unamuno.* Buckingham: SHRE and Open University Press.