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Professional Ethics Training
in Higher Education

Abstract

Recent years have witnessed particular awareness of, and societal demand for, professional ethics. Increasing emphasis is being placed on the importance of including ethical considerations in university education, and on the decisive role played by universities in achieving rounded professional development. The ethical aspects of professional practice are seen to be essential for producing competent, effective professionals. The presented research addresses this issue in the context of aspiring professionals currently undergoing training, and aims to determine their attitudes and perceptions in response to certain key ethical issues. To this end, a mixed research methodology (first qualitative, and subsequently quantitative) was employed. The results reveal important pedagogical issues to be taken into account when designing professional training programmes, in line with the current trajectory of university didactics.

Keywords: *professional ethics, training, university*

Introduction

The presented paper is based on three prior assumptions. The first is that professional training for university students has been predominated by cognitive and technical content. This has led to a growing concern for providing a high quality education that should include, in addition, ethical training, which traditionally has been rather overlooked (Martínez, Buxarrais and Esteban, 2002) or at least has taken an implicit role, in deference to equipping students with technical

skills. Specifically, as Bolívar (2005) warned, there is a worrying deficit in Higher Education in terms of preparing students morally and ethically for their chosen professions. Fortunately, there are now increasing calls to include such training in any university curriculum. The work of Esteban, Buxarrais and Mellen (2013) makes an important contribution in this regard.

The second premise of the presented paper is that professional ethics, as a significant and necessary aspect of a rounded university education, can and should be taught explicitly at university. The attitudes and values that a professional from any sphere needs to have are not innate, but rather must be learned and, therefore, taught. In other words it should not be assumed that each new professional will begin exercising their profession responsibly, fairly and respectably purely on the basis of intuition, without previously having been provided with notions, tools and approaches that they can draw on as references (García, Sales, Moliner and Ferrández, 2009).

The third assumption goes still further, and is based on the works by Agejas, Parada and Oliver (2007) and Carr (2006). In the former work, notably the authors affirm that "there can be no professional competence without ethical competence" (ibid. p.80); all professionals carry an ethical–social obligation, by the very social nature of human beings, which must not be overlooked or forgotten when preparing future generations of professionals. The ethical aspects of professional practice are therefore essential if students are to become competent and effective professionals, as asserted by Rubacha and Chomczyńska-Rubacha (2013) in one of their recent studies.

As outlined in the literature, these premises are of particular relevance if one considers how employers trust those universities that train the employees of the future in all three dimensions (theoretical, technical and ethical) (Agejas *et al.*, 2007). This means questioning the functions of the university in the present-day context, i.e., their capacity to provide training in professional ethical competence. While higher education has always been charged with educating future professionals in diverse areas of knowledge, nowadays it must also take care to produce genuine citizens, who are responsible and *ethically committed* to the social realities that surround them (Escámez, Ortega and Martínez, 2005).

Societal demands for ethically-aware professionals

There is a growing societal awareness of, and demand for, ethics among the professions (Hirsch, 2003). There is also an increasing emphasis on the need to

include the ethical dimension in professional training and in the scientific and social research field. Within this context there has been a gradual introduction of content devoted to professional ethics and deontological concerns on university degree programmes. For instance, in some universities the delivery of subjects related to professional ethics has been made mandatory across all programmes.

According to the work of De Vicente *et al.* (2006), one of the fundamental aims of a university education is to train the professionals of the future. As well as theoretical and practical competences, professionalism comprises ethical professional conduct, as typically demanded by citizens and clients alike. Professionals who have received their training at university should possess the ethical principles and moral standards that help (along with the appropriate professional knowledge) to guarantee excellent service.

Universities unquestionably play a decisive role in producing well-rounded professionals. This not only requires that these institutions deliver discipline-based knowledge; being well-rounded also implies that future professionals themselves must understand that their work will only truly make sense if it betters the life of others and of society as a whole. This scenario begs the question of how universities, as institutions, communities, and learning organizations, might create a suitable framework for self-organization that fits with the emerging social, political, economic and technological needs (García *et al.*, 2009). In turn, this calls for training of professionals to be reviewed in two key aspects: students' preparation for professional practice and their ethical education.

Aim of the study

The main aim of the presented research is to identify the attitudes and opinions of university students, as future professionals, regarding certain competences related to professional ethics. The paper also aims to establish if certain variables regarding the identity of the sample have a differentiating effect on these opinions.

Within the context of these broad objectives, the following hypotheses are put forward:

1. There is a significant association between the gender of the students surveyed and their opinions regarding ethical professional competences.
2. There is a significant association between the age of the students surveyed and their perceptions of professional ethics.
3. There is a significant association between combining work with study and the attitudes of the students surveyed regarding professional ethics.

Methodology

The study, undertaken by the University of Granada (Spain), was structured around two distinct but complementary phases. The first phase was exploratory in nature and addressed qualitative data-collection, beginning with a group dialogue session organized over the course of two seminars. Analysis of the information that was gathered enabled the researchers to refine the design for the data-collection tool to be used in the second, quantitative, phase of research. This latter stage took a survey-based approach, applying statistical tests (Creswell, 2008) to confirm, or otherwise, the research hypotheses.

The qualitative phase

Qualitative research plays a particularly important role in the early stages of any study, thanks to its exploratory nature. The techniques associated with the qualitative approach are typically based on smaller groups of subjects or experts who are invited to share information that will subsequently be analysed via larger samples using quantitative techniques (Rabadán and Ato, 2003).

Meanwhile, the group dialogue session is the most flexible methodology offering the greatest scope to adapt to any topic or situation. In this approach, participants' views are drawn together to form an overall sense of the collective opinion in the room. For these reasons the presented research began with data-collection from two such sessions. More specifically, this first phase of research consisted of analysing the responses of the participants to three key questions: 1) what does it mean to be a good professional?; 2) are the ethical aspects of professional practice essential to being a competent and effective professional?; and 3) should all university degrees include an assignment on professional ethics?

Once these sessions were complete, analysis categories were established for each question and each group. Significant pedagogical conclusions and implications were derived from this analysis, which can contribute to designing improved professional training.

The quantitative phase

The method used for this phase of the research was a survey aimed at a representative sample of the target population for the study, comprising students at the

University of Granada, Spain. The sample consisted of 182 students, selected via simple random sampling.

Sample description

Of the 182 students in the sample, 61.5% were women, and 27.5% of the sample combined study with employment. As regards the age range of the overall sample, 65.4% were between 18 and 22 years old, 23.1% were between 23 and 27, and 7.7% were between 28 and 32. The following graph shows the distribution of the respondents by age range.

Graph 1. Sample distribution by the age of respondent
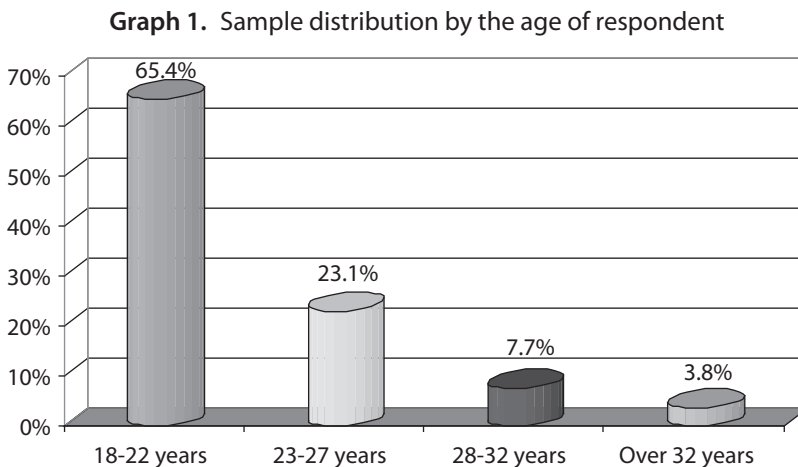
Source: Own research

The data-collection instrument

Data-collection was conducted using the 'Questionnaire on Attitudes to Professional Ethics'. It comprised 55 statements, adapted from a baseline reference tool developed by Hirsch (2005) to reflect the information gathered in the previous phase of the research. A Likert scale was used, with four alternative responses (1= totally agree; 2= disagree; 3= agree; and 4= totally agree). The items covered by the questionnaire were based on four main areas of content referring to different aspects of professional competence, namely:

- *Cognitive competencies*, divided into four dimensions: knowledge, training and professional competence; continuous development; innovation; and technical knowledge and skills.

- *Social competencies,* again comprising four elements: interpersonal relations; communication; team working; and capacity for hard work.
- *Ethical competencies*, comprising six elements: responsibility; honesty; professional and personal ethics; acting out of a sense of providing society with a service; respect; and acting subject to moral principles and professional values.
- *Affective–emotional competencies*, referring to two issues: identification with the profession, and emotional capacity.

Data Analysis

In order to understand the students' attitudes and perceptions, their responses to the questionnaire were analysed, along with the most significant interventions from the group sessions.

During the qualitative phase of the study, two seminars were organised, attended by an average of 50 students per session. Each of the questions prompted a great diversity of responses, which were pulled together to form different categories for subsequent analysis. To systematize the responses, all of the words, phrases or definitions expressed by the students were analysed, and the responses sharing similar content were grouped together. Once these had been classified, the absolute frequencies and percentages were calculated.

Next, the data from the questionnaire were examined statistically using SPSS software. First, a descriptive analysis was undertaken so as to achieve an overview of the results. A contingency analysis was then carried out to establish which identification variables from the sample presented a significant association with regard to gender, age and employment status.

Results

This section describes the most significant results for each research phase, these forming the basis for subsequent conclusions.

The qualitative phase

Following the analysis of the two group sessions, it can be affirmed that for the majority of the students:

- *A good professional* is a person characterized by demonstrating: the necessary knowledge to carry out their profession; and the necessary attitudes

(willingness to learn, take responsibility, initiative, commitment, flexibility, keenness to continuously develop) and values (honesty, responsibility, commitment, constancy) that enable them to exercise their work in a professional and competent manner.

- *The ethical aspects of professional practice* are essential to being a competent, effective professional. The students asked for better information and training on this topic (notions, tools and working styles they can use to help guide them).
- *Professional ethics as course content/assignment.* When asked about the need for an assignment devoted to professional ethics on all degree programmes, 73% of the future professionals considered it to be necessary; 9% thought not; and 18% were unsure.

The quantitative phase

Descriptive analysis

An initial examination of the data (averages and standard deviations) obtained for each of the items in the questionnaire reveals a degree of heterogeneousness in the students' responses, with average scores for each of the items ranging between 1.19 and 3.84. There are also certain differences in the standard deviations with dispersion ranging between 0.372 and 0.961. Both intervals are indicative of a difference between the data obtained in the study.

To arrive at an initial approximation of the students' attitudes toward professional ethics, the highest average scores were taken into account. The highest average pertains to item *"It is a major achievement to be doing professionally what I most enjoy"* (X=3.84), closely followed by items: "*I may need training in ethics so as to be able to deal with conflicts in my professional work*" (X=3.81); "*To exercise my profession well I cannot limit my development solely to technical skills*" (X=3.80); and "*I consider it essential to take into account ethical issues when exercising my profession*" (X=3.77). It can also be observed that as well as presenting high average values these items also reached the lowest standard deviation values (between 0.372 and 0.419). This indicates that these variables not only attracted the respondents' acceptance but also registered less variability of responses.

In contrast to these data, as regards the lowest average scores, the lowest of all corresponds to item *"The solution to the problems of society is a technical matter that does not require the citizens to be listened to"* (X=1.19), followed by items: "*So long as science and technology continue to make advances, there is no need to be concerned about their consequences*" (X=1.38); "*The solution to the problems of*

society is not the job of professionals" (X=1.52); and "*What mainly interests me in my profession are the money and prestige it can give me*" (X=1.62). The latter is worth special attention as it presents one of the highest standard deviations for one of the lowest averages. These data demonstrate greater variability among the students' responses.

Examining the percentages for each of the response options, the majority of the future professionals in the sample said they totally disagreed with the notion that "*The solution to the problems of society is a technical matter that does not require the citizens to be listened to*" (84.6%) and with the statement: "*The solution to the problems of society is not the job of professionals*" (55.5%).

Meanwhile, 81.3% of the respondents totally agreed that training in ethics is necessary to help them deal with conflicts in their professional work. The majority of the students totally agreed that in order to achieve good professional delivery they should not limit themselves to learning technical skills (79.7%), and considered it essential to take ethical aspects into account (77.5%).

With weaker scores in the affirmative, 67.6% of the students agreed with the notion that they were acting as good professionals when showing sensitivity to the needs of others, as a job well done is worth nothing if it does not contribute to helping others (65.9%). The majority also asserted that there are certain ethical decisions that can arise in the course of their professional duties that are so important they should not be left only to the criteria of organizations (65.4%); and that to be a good professional they should not ignore the problems of society (64.3%).

Contingency analysis

Contingency analyses revealed, firstly, which of the variables from the questionnaire presented a significant association with regard to the independent variable 'gender'. Table 1 shows the significance of the relationships between these variables.

Table 1. Significant relationship between the variable 'gender' and questionnaire items

VARIABLES	χ^2
I chose this career so as to be helpful to people	27.461**
I prefer working as part of a team because the result is of a higher quality	13.714**
I am convinced that in order to be a good professional I will have to make sacrifices	9.534*

**p≤ 0.01   *p≤ 0.05

Source: Own research

Internal analysis of the associations between the variables in Table 1 shows that choosing a given course of study and professional career in order to be of service to others, and the idea that to be a good professional one must make sacrifices, are significantly associated with the gender of the respondents. More female than male students agreed or totally agreed with these statements (78.6% and 86.6% *vs.* 42.8% and 70%, respectively). There is also a significant relationship between gender and the preference for team working; in this case it was the male students who believed that working as a team produces better quality results (70% *vs.* 50.9%, respectively).

Secondly, Table 2 shows the results of the analysis to ascertain the significance of the relationships between the variable 'age' and each of the items in the questionnaire.

Table 2. Significant relationship between the variable 'age' and questionnaire items

VARIABLES	χ^2
I am worried that I might end up doing my profession simply out of routine	18.139*

**p≤ 0.01   *p≤ 0.05

Source: Own research

Further internal analysis of the correspondence between different variables revealed that the concern regarding doing a profession purely out of routine was associated with the age of the respondent. For the majority of the students between 18 and 22 years of age (86.5%), this represented a major concern, while for those over 32 it was less of an issue (57.2%).

Finally, Table 3 captures the significant relationships between the variable 'combining work with study' and each of the variables in the questionnaire.

Table 3. Significant relationship between the variable 'combining work with study' and questionnaire items

VARIABLES	χ^2
Fulfilling my professional commitments on time is important	6.225*
Upholding confidentiality is important in professional life	4.656*
I should not take major professional decisions without first assessing their consequences	14.781**

**p≤ 0.01   *p≤ 0.05

Source: Own research

These analyses demonstrated that there were more students combining employment with study (*vs.* those purely devoted to studying) who totally agreed that fulfilling professional commitments on time is important (56% *vs.* 35.6%, respectively). Similarly, the majority of the students working during their studies (54%) entirely agreed that upholding confidentiality is important in professional practice, *vs.* 36.4% of those who did not combine employment with study. Furthermore, 64% of those who combined work with study were totally in agreement that they should not take major professional decisions without first assessing their possible consequences, compared to 32.6% of those who were not employed while studying.

Conclusions and implications of the study

A number of interesting responses were gleaned from students regarding professional ethics, regarding: what it takes to be a good professional; the need to consider the ethical aspects of professional practice to become a competent, effective practitioner; and a call for professional ethics to be made a core assignment in all university degree programmes.

In their attitudes toward professional ethics, the majority of the students highlighted the following issues. First, they considered that in order to exercise their profession effectively they could not limit themselves to developing only technical skills, but rather ethical aspects should also be taken into account as training in ethical considerations could be helpful in dealing with conflicts of professional nature. Second, virtually all the students affirmed that the solution to social problems also sits with professionals; and that major professional issues can be resolved by listening to others.

Significant relationships were found to exist between the gender, the age and the employment status of the respondents and several variables from the questionnaire, relating to social, cognitive and ethical competencies.

A significant pedagogical implication is derived from this research: the need to train students in key ethical issues that can be of enormous value when designing and delivering university courses. Being in favour of training in professional ethics means assimilating that if universities are to produce good professionals they must help students to become aware not only of which profession they wish to take up, but also what type of professional they aspire to be. On this premise, dual reflec-

tion is required with a view to enabling future professionals not only to learn their craft but also become ethically-aware citizens. Thus, as reflected in the presented paper, the ethical aspects of professional practice become essential for operating competently and effectively.

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