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# **How a Business Ethics Education Better Equips Students for their Careers: A Critical Analysis**

**Sumita Theagesan**

## **Introduction**

In today's highly volatile business environment significant emphasis has been placed on the abilities of individuals to successfully recognise, deal with and navigate through complicated ethical issues. A business ethics education is a powerful tool that ensures the next generation of business leaders possess such qualities and are, therefore, more effectively prepared to meet the ethical challenges they will ultimately encounter in the workplace. This paper identifies and analyses the ways in which a business ethics education equips students with the skills and knowledge necessary for a successful career in business.

## **How does a business ethics education equip students career-wise?**

A review of the extant literature on the topic reveals that there are multiple means by which a business ethics education can better equip students for their future careers.

Firstly, it increases students' awareness of the ethical issues they will encounter in the business world (Gautschi and Jones, 1998; Weber and Glyptis, 2000; Lau, 2010). Ethical problems pervade all aspects of business and managerial activity (Maclagan, 1995; Webley, 1999). By providing educational experiences that involve discussing and analysing ethical dilemmas, students' ability to recognise and identify ethical issues in a business setting is substantially raised (Cohen and Cornwell, 1989; Loe and Weeks, 2000). Given that one cannot act ethically in business unless one understands that ethical issues exist (Fulmer and Cargile, 1987; Armstrong, 1993; Armstrong, Ketz and Owsen, 2003), and that recognition of ethical issues represents the first step in the ethical decision-making process (Rest, 1986; Ritter, 2006), sharpening students' moral awareness is imperative for their future business careers (Felton and Sims, 2005).

Secondly, a business ethics education equips students with fundamental intellectual tools to navigate ethical matters throughout their careers (Rossouw, 2002; Nguyen et al., 2008). Students will face many ethical challenges in the workplace (Ferrell, Fraedrich and Ferrell, 2012). Educating students in ethical theories and concepts that underlie ethical decision making – such as deontology,

utilitarianism or corporate social responsibility – will provide them with robust frameworks and the vocabulary necessary for tackling the ethical dilemmas they will inevitably experience (Falkenberg and Woiceshyn, 2008; Dzurainin, Shortridge and Smith, 2013). Studies suggest that delivering normative theoretical material via a compulsory stand-alone course and integrating the application of material in discipline-specific contexts throughout the business curriculum is the most effective method to impart to students the requisite tools for ethical decision making in business contexts (Maclagan, 2003; Crane and Matten, 2007).

Thirdly, it sharpens students' reasoning abilities, which are essential for ethical decision making in business (Reidenbach and Robin, 1990; Williams and Dewett, 2005). All business decisions require ethical considerations given they affect a wide variety of stakeholders. However, making ethical decisions in business is not a simple "black and white" determination of what is right or wrong. Rather, it is a complex and ambiguous process that involves weighing up the conflicting interests and values of stakeholders, evaluating different courses of action and considering various ethical principles (Pettifor, Etsay and Paquet, 2000; Felton and Sims, 2005). A teaching method that require students to wrestle with ethical dilemmas and provides opportunities for them to explore conflicting viewpoints and apply ethical doctrines will significantly improve students' moral reasoning, judgment and critical thinking skills (Lowry, 2003; Cloninger and Selvarajan, 2010). As today's students are the future decision makers in business, ensuring they develop critical reasoning abilities is paramount. In turn, students' capacity to become ethical business leaders is strengthened (Brown and Trevino, 2006; Dzurainin, Shortridge and Smith, 2013). Literature advocates that contextualised ethics case studies that entail real decision scenarios are a valuable pedagogical tool in developing students' reasoning competencies (Cagle and Baucus, 2006; McWilliams and Nahavandi, 2006; Falkenberg and Woiceshyn, 2008).

Finally, business ethics education elicits a greater awareness among students of the ethical responsibilities they will assume as tomorrow's executives (Swanson and Frederick, 2003; Baetz and Sharp, 2004; Kashyap, Mir and Iyer, 2006). Recently, there has been a growing expectation and demand for ethically responsible leaders by businesses – as the future employers of students – and the wider community – particularly in the wake of a string of corporate scandals such as Enron and WorldCom (Joyner and Payne, 2002; Carson, 2003). Exposing students to, and addressing the importance of, the professional norms and responsibilities of business as part of their ethics learning improves their awareness and motivates them towards the moral obligations and personal and professional

responsibilities required of managers (Melé, 2005). This is vital for students from a career perspective as it increases their propensity to meet the ethical and leadership accountability expectations that will be placed on them as future business leaders (Sims and Felton, 2006) and decreases their tolerance for unethical behaviour in the workplace (Lau, 2010). Studies urge the employment of ethics learning strategies, including role-playing (Mintz, 1995) and analysing narratives espousing moral exemplars in business (Dobson and Armstrong, 1995; Steward, 1997), as well as utilising materials such as professional codes of conduct (Abbott, 1983; Bowie and Duska, 1985; Oddo, 1997) to successfully develop students' sensitivities to the moral responsibilities required of managerial and leadership positions in business.

## **Conclusion**

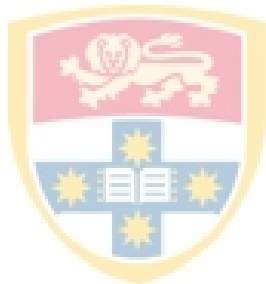
If today's business students wish to succeed as future leaders in a modern business environment riddled with ethical challenges it is evident that an ethics education is indispensable. An ethics education not only highlights to students the potential ethical issues they will face, but is instrumental in providing them the frameworks, vocabulary and skills for resolving ethical dilemmas and increasing cognisance of their ethical responsibilities as tomorrow's managers. While conversations around business ethics education are not new, providing additional insight into how a business ethics education better equips students for their future careers is a vital contribution to a topic that deserves further attention from the academic and business community alike.

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