

Ethics Matters: Managing Ethical issues in Higher Education

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Abstract: *An institution that is consciously and deliberately ethically aware will play a valuable role in pursuing wider community and societal aims. Our staff and students should be enabled to handle the range of ethical dilemmas they will face in an increasingly multicultural society with global dimensions. It is necessary to make people aware of how valuable the ethics are, irrespective of the particular professional fields. Higher education should be regarded as an inherently valuable activity that sets out to benefit society. The relationships between the organization and its funders and commercial partners provide scope for conflicts of interest and other ethical dilemmas. This study presents an overview of the dilemmas faced by organizations and thereupon constructs a discussion positively cast towards the better and practical solutions.*

Keywords: *Ethics matters, ethical issues in Higher Education.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

An institution that is consciously and deliberately ethically aware will play a valuable role in pursuing wider community and societal aims. Our staff and students should be enabled to handle the range of ethical dilemmas they will face in an increasingly multicultural society with global dimensions. It is necessary to make people aware of how valuable the ethics are, irrespective of the particular professional fields. Addressing institution-wide ethical principles and practices is a major undertaking and requires time, resources, commitment and leadership. It is also vital that senior champions set an example by demonstrating ethical behavior and living by the institution's ethical principles. The process for developing a framework – including the involvement of staff, students and other relevant groups – is at least as important as the framework itself.

2. DISCUSSION:

Higher education should be regarded as an inherently valuable activity that sets out to benefit society. The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in 1997 stated “we believe that the aim of higher education should be to sustain a learning society”. In addition, the Nolan Committee's First Report on Standards in Public Life sets out seven principles that “apply to all aspects of public life”. These are selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

Maintaining high ethical standards is made explicit, or at least implicit, in the aims and objectives of most institutions. But HEIs still need to ensure that these aims are put into practice in the day to day running of the institution. Ethical issues arise in a wide range of situations, including those relating to how an institution treats its employees, students and other groups. The relationships between the organization and its funders and commercial partners provide scope for conflicts of interest and other ethical dilemmas. Marketing practices and admissions procedures may raise questions about honesty and fairness, while upholding academic freedom can have both legal and ethical consequences. Ethical issues range from plagiarism to public interest disclosure and from race equality to confidentiality of information.

While legislation may dictate how to approach some situations, this will not always be the case. Neither should legislation drive an institution's approach to ethical issues. It is up to individual institutions to determine what is and is not acceptable behavior for their organizations. This guide is designed to help institutions make these decisions.

3. DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK:

It suggests how to go about developing a framework and what to consider when doing so. The process of developing a framework is at least as important as the final product. Discussion and debate will help to produce a ‘living’ document rather than a set of rules that will gather dust on a shelf.

- **Leadership and Endorsement:** An institution-wide ethical framework is unlikely to be effective unless it has a Leadership and champion at the highest level and is endorsed by an institution's governing endorsement body. The head of the institution would be the obvious choice as champion, although the chair of governors

may be more appropriate in some cases. It is also vital that senior champions set an example with their own behavior by ‘living’ the institution’s ethical principles and practices.

- **Allocate Time and Resources:** An individual or committee will be needed to lead the project. Although HEIs Allocate time and have limited resources, it is vital to allocate sufficient time and a reasonable resources budget to those involved in the process. Developing the framework, putting it into practice and monitoring it are challenging tasks that will take time and energy.
- **Start with values:** An institution’s values should underpin everything that it does. It is important Start with values that any ethical framework evolves out of and is consistent with existing institutional mission and values statements. The framework will help to translate institutional values into action throughout the organization. Core values are an integral part of any ethical framework and, if an HEI has not identified a set of organizational values, it would make sense to do so as part of this initiative. It is also important to consider the professional values of members of staff in order to ensure that the framework will not clash with these values.
- **Building on existing consistent and ethical documents:** When developing a framework, it is important that it works alongside and is Build on existing consistent with existing ethics codes and other related documents. HEIs can ethics-related also learn from the experience of different departments. For example, many documents HEIs have a comprehensive approach to research ethics and this can be used as a strong foundation for developing an institution-wide framework. It is valuable to ask what already exists and what is missing in terms of the institution’s current approach to ethics.

The framework will not necessarily replace existing ethics-related documents but will refer readers to other relevant documents for further information. Where documents already exist, it is important to ensure that they are up to date and that they are consistent with one another and with the institutional framework.

4. POLICY INTO PRACTICE:

Developing a framework is the first stage in addressing ethical matters within an institution. But it is not enough on its own. The framework document must be read, understood and used throughout the institution. One of the most important aspects of this is to encourage dialogue about ethical concerns and to develop a culture where staff, students and other groups feel comfortable about raising and discussing ethical issues.

- **Leadership:** Leadership is just as vital at this stage as it is in developing a framework. Leadership Without a senior champion, it may be an uphill struggle to maintain momentum once the framework has been published. In addition, teams such as human resources and marketing could also play a valuable role in terms of communicating and putting the framework into practice. Again, it is important that champions demonstrate ethical behavior as well as encouraging others to work and study according to the institution’s framework.
- **Committee’s Publication:** HEIs may choose to set up an institution-wide ethics committee to oversee the Ethics committee’s publication and introduction of the framework. It would be good practice to include staff, student, governing body and other representatives in order to gain as wide a perspective as possible. In addition, the committee will need to include senior individuals who have the authority to take action where it is needed. The committee may also want to take decisions on major ethical issues and monitor, review and report on the use of the framework. Any institution-wide ethics committee will need to work alongside relevant existing committees such as research ethics committees.
- **Publication and Dissemination:** Once the final version of the framework has been endorsed by the head of the Publication and institution and the governing body, it can be published and launched. Some dissemination organizations will choose to publish their frameworks in booklet form, to make the document easier to distribute and more accessible. Others may include the framework in their staff or student handbooks, or in other documents.
- **Intranet:** While posting a framework on the institution’s web site and intranet is good practice, it is vital that relevant individuals – such as staff, students and members of governing bodies - read the document. In an ideal situation, everyone would have their own copy. If this is not possible, then individuals must be made aware of the existence of the framework and encouraged to read and refer to it. Institutions may also want to provide copies for suppliers, business partners and other interested parties.
- **Training and Development:** Ethical awareness training can take many different forms. Institutions may Training and staff choose to explain their framework informally – in departmental meetings, development perhaps, or to groups. Training can be ethics-specific or integrated into existing training programs. While training staff is vital, institutions will need to decide whether they want to train others such as members of governing bodies or students. Although it is not covered in this guide, teaching ethics as part of the curriculum is extremely valuable.

- **Ethical Literacy:** An ethical framework cannot encompass every possible ethical issue or dilemma. For this reason, it is important that staff and others are encouraged to develop ‘ethical literacy’ and explore how to handle dilemmas as they arise. Providing other opportunities for employees to disclose and discuss issues is also useful to Staff, members of governing bodies and, where appropriate, students will need Adherence to engage with and adhere to the framework in order for it to work effectively. A decision will have to be taken on how far the framework is an aspirational or obligatory guide to behavior and how it will be enforced. Moreover, the institution must decide whether it wants to encourage staff and others to choose their own course of action in certain circumstances, as opposed to following rules of behavior. It makes sense to review an ethical framework approximately every three years Reviewing to allow sufficient time for the results of monitoring to highlight any problems with the framework. It is worth seeking a wide range of perspectives on whether the framework is relevant and effective. HEIs will also want to respond to changes in legislation and new ethical issues that arise.
- **Reporting framework and Consultation:** It is good practice to report on the introduction and effectiveness of an ethical Reporting framework. Institutions may choose to comment on their approach to ethical issues in annual reports and update governing bodies on developments. Consultation is necessary to ensure that the framework addresses genuine Learn from others issues and concerns. In addition, staff and other groups are more likely to use the framework if they have been involved in its development. Staff, students and representatives of the governing body must be involved in this process. HEIs can learn from organizations such as professional bodies and may also want to talk to other groups such as business partners, funding bodies, unions or local community representatives. HEIs may also find it useful to look at how other institutions and other types of organization are addressing ethics. The wider the consultation, the more comprehensive the results will be.
- **Language and Length:** In terms of language, the framework needs to be clearly written and Think about straightforward to understand. Organizations tend to use a mixture of language and aspirational language – such as ‘we try to do x’ - and rules – ‘it is length unacceptable for us to do y’. It is good practice to clarify when text refers to aims or requirements. It is also important to produce an honest and meaningful document as readers will be quick to point out where the framework differs from how the institution actually behaves. Institutions will need to pay particular attention to language if they intend to have staff and others sign up to something that can be used in disciplinary proceedings. The length of the framework will also have an impact on how easy it is to read and how comprehensive it can be.
- **Including and deciding the beginning and the end:** You may want to include a short introduction from the head of the institution at Decide on the beginning of the framework document. This statement could include the beginning and purpose of the framework and the institution’s core values, as well as stating an end the commitment of the institution and its governing body to maintaining high ethical standards. Different HEIs will have distinct interpretations of the purpose of their own framework. Examples might include providing guidance for staff and students, upholding institutional values or safeguarding the reputation of the organization. It is good practice to include a section at the end of the framework on how it will be implemented and monitored. You may also want to provide contact details for further information, feedback and guidance as well as for reporting any issues that arise.
- **Structure and Hybrid approach:** Ethical frameworks can take a stakeholder, issues-based, functions-based or choose a hybrid approach. A stakeholder approach is structured in terms of relationships with specific groups of interested parties such as staff, students, suppliers, business partners, funding bodies and so forth. The Association of Colleges’ code takes this approach. An issues-based approach explains the institution’s approach to a series of important issues, such as equal opportunities or academic misconduct. The illustrative framework in Part II of this guide takes a functions-based approach that focuses on higher education activities.

Each approach has different features and is equally valid. HEIs will need to decide what is appropriate for their organization.

5. KEY POINTS:

- Ethical issues arise in any and all of an institution’s operations, from purchasing and estate management to research and teaching.
- Most HEIs have defined their mission and values. Addressing institution-wide ethical principles will help to ensure that these aims and values are put into practice in the day to day running of the institution.
- It is up to individual institutions to determine what is and is not appropriate behavior for their organizations. What is acceptable for one organization may be unacceptable to another - and both for entirely logical and legitimate reasons.
- Any ethical policy framework must evolve out of the institution’s mission and values. It must also be

consistent with and work alongside existing ethics-related documents.

Addressing institution-wide ethical principles and practices is a major undertaking and requires time, resources, commitment and leadership. It is also vital that senior champions set an example by demonstrating ethical behaviour and living by the institution's ethical principles. The process for developing a framework – including the involvement of staff, students and other relevant groups – is at least as important as the framework itself.

Simply publishing a framework will not ensure ethical behavior. The framework needs to be put into practice through training, monitoring, review and reporting.

6. CREATING AN ETHICAL EDUCATIONAL CLIMATE:

Finally, character education means creating a culture that calls for everyone in the school community to be the best people they can be. Character education programs that work are, in fact, a giant mutual-improvement process involving students, teachers, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders.

None of this is easy, especially given all the things we are already asking schools to do. When we talk with teachers about character education, they usually are enthusiastic about the idea but daunted by the problem of fitting it into crammed curricula. Their time seems overwhelmed by bureaucratic tasks, and they are hampered by the recent elimination of in-service days during the school year.

But if character education is integrated into the content and processes of instruction, schools can become models of ethical thought and values. Faculty identify elements of the curriculum that support the virtues and add other materials on ethics. Ethical decision making is taught and practiced throughout the school, but it is supplemented by training in reflection, coping skills, and cooperation.

Just as important, faculty work at being available, credible role models of the virtues. In this, they are joined by parents, who can receive help through the school in strategies for raising ethical children. These can include such important skills as maintaining a daily dialogue with a child; connecting with his or her friends; effective, consistent reinforcement of desired behaviors; and skillful reduction of undesired behaviors.

The work of character education in schools and homes always starts with the adults. When we talk about the moral decline of our youth, we are often just observing our own reflection in the children who learned what we modelled. As teachers and parents, we must demonstrate not only the right behavior but also the kind of thoughtfulness that makes a moral education more than the human version of obedience school. At its best, character education cultivates an appreciation for the power of story, reflection, and the essential tools of habit and reason in dealing with the complexities of daily life.

7. THE HABITS OF MORAL BEHAVIOR:

Character has more to do with habits and dispositions than decisions. Truth be told, we tend to do in any given situation what we usually do in similar situations and have been doing for some time. Thus, the best way I can improve my moral behavior tomorrow is to improve what I do today. The habits I acquire now not only constitute my current character but also form it for the future. Developing traits such as honesty and self-control will help me respond more automatically as an ethical person would.

Part of character education is encouraging the acquisition of these habits by offering students effective role models, both in real life and through stories and heroes. For better or worse, the character we form is very much influenced by the character of the role models we choose. Jerome Stumphauzer notes that kids most prone for delinquency were encouraged in that behavior by antisocial role models and redirected to better behavior by prosocial role models.

In either case, the role models who were most available to kids and real to them had the most effect—a stunning endorsement for time and integrity. Neither parents nor schools can significantly impact the moral development of children without daily, individual connection. One of our major goals in influencing moral behavior is to insure that we are in the loop, so that as kids consider the moral dimensions of their lives, caring adults have a chance to influence the outcome. As much as parents and schools need to model what good moral character looks like, they also need to teach students how to deal with the things that get in the way of moral behavior. Students are most likely not to do what they know they ought when they are in angry and intensely emotional situations; when peers pressure them; when personal or academic honesty works against their own self interest; or when they are involved in patterns of self-destructive, drug/alcohol-related, gang, or delinquent behavior.

Students can learn practical ways to overcome these obstacles. They need training in anger control, social skills, conflict resolution, dealing with hostile people, and situational perception (not finding trouble where it isn't intended).

8. CONCLUSION:

Ethics Matters: *Managing Ethical Issues in Higher Education* is designed to help and tackle ethical matters within and throughout their organizations and working places in general. It is written for anyone who wishes to develop or has responsibility for developing or revising an institution's approach to ethical issues.

Research undertaken for this suggests that there is no coherent or consistent approach to documenting ethical policy at present. This sets out to raise questions, encourage debate and make suggestions on how HEIs might develop their own approach. It is a starting point for thinking about ethical issues and is not intended to be prescriptive or definitive. Universities and colleges are complex and autonomous organizations, each with a distinct history and culture. Ethical issues and priorities will not be the same in all institutions and each HEI will need to tackle ethical concerns in a way that makes sense for its own organization.

It makes an attempt to identify reasons for articulating ethical principles and explores potential ethical dilemmas. It also suggests how Higher education might choose to go about developing an ethical policy framework for their own organization and how to put a framework into practice.

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