Maintaining ethical standards in higher education teaching and research practice: A case study

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Abstract: Higher education institutions are viewed by society as centres that are catalysts in transforming knowledge into wisdom. This being society’s expectation places a huge responsibility on universities to maintain the highest ethical standards in teaching and the conduct of research. The aim of this paper is to first, stimulate thinking and discussion around the themes of the role of higher education contributing to the development of a knowledge-based society of the highest ethical standards, and second to examine the cultural considerations and related ethical implications regarding teaching and research. In the paper the extent to which we as teachers in higher education are cognisant of this role and how we meet our ethical obligations are considered. A snapshot of the ethics policy and its implementation at a large multi-modal, multi-campus university is provided to stimulate discussion of the efficacy and impact of such policies and practices on ethical standards. Also explored is the role played by the staff development units (SDU’s) in assisting staff to implement ethics policies in their teaching and research. The dissemination of policy, implications for its implementation and practice, the dilemmas staff experience, and strategies used to deal with meeting the challenges of ethics and cultural diversity are focused on. In the round-table discussion delegates can consider the role of SDU’s in the delivery of the ethics agenda, the support of staff to be sensitive to and meet ethical and cultural obligations in teaching and research practice, and explore strategies to achieve high ethical standards so that we have a society that is not just knowledgeable, but wise.

Keywords: staff development, teaching ethics, research ethics, ethics code

Introduction

As teachers in higher education we boastfully talk about our academic freedom. But are we truly free? We are bound by employment contracts, professional codes of conduct and our conscience. We are constantly confronted with choices we have to make regarding all aspects of our lives. Focussing on our profession as academics in higher education we have to make decisions about what we teach, how we teach, what and how we assess our students, to mention a few. We also need to consider what and how we research, how we interact and relate to our research participants, and how they are affected. It is easy to make these decisions especially since they are external to ourselves. According to Lee (2001), like the Korean academic we tend to be silent about the ethical issues and questions concerning our own principles and practices. Some of the thorny issues he raises are, e.g., grade inflation, poor recruitment practices, secrecy required by research sponsors, and consultancy taking precedence over core duties of teaching and research, issues which reflect the status quo of many of the institutions we come from regardless of the policies in place. We tend to justify our actions and practices as academic freedom, ‘the autonomy of the university itself as an
institution dedicated to knowledge, the freedom of the faculty to teach and pursue their research, and the freedom both of the faculty and of the students to learn’, (De George, 2003). However, the greatest challenge facing staff is balancing ethical duty to defend educational values, striving for effective learning, sound scholarship and deliberative governance while facing change in higher education (Simpson, 2003).

An attempt is made in this paper to consider one of the fundamental goals of higher education, the purpose of developing a knowledge society. More specifically, the following may be identified as the aims to get to grips with the ethics of teaching and research:

- Stimulate thinking and discussion around the role of higher education contributing to the development of a knowledge-based society of the highest ethical standards,
- Examine the cultural considerations and related ethical implications relating to teaching and research, and
- Explore the role of SDU’s in the delivery of the ethics agenda in higher education.

The context of Massey University’s ethics policy, implications of its implementation and practice, the dilemmas staff experience and the strategies used to deal with meeting the challenges of ethics and cultural diversity are focussed on. The ethical and cultural considerations relating to teaching and research are explored. The role played by SDU’s in the delivery of the ethics agenda is considered. To fulfil higher education goals lip-service can, therefore no longer be paid to monitoring quality and/or development initiatives relating to the achievement of the stated learning outcomes and graduate attributes.

In the roundtable discussion, delegates will be given the opportunity to:

- Consider our role as teachers in higher education, how we meet our ethical obligations in terms of policy and practice relating to teaching and research,
- The support provided to staff to fulfil their ethical and cultural obligations relating to teaching and research, and
- Explore strategies that can be implemented to achieve and maintain high ethical standards so that we have a knowledgeable and wise society.

**Role of higher education**

One of the goals of higher education is to educate students so that they achieve the explicit programme learning outcomes. Learning occurs only when students assimilate the new knowledge by taking ownership of the learning experience by making sense of the knowledge in terms of their own life experiences. The student, we hope, becomes not only knowledgeable, but wise, using the knowledge to inform future thinking and behaviour. As a result of being educated the student will be able to operate successfully as an individual, a member of the family, community and culture.

There are several international trends that impact on student learning outcomes. There are, among others, a focus on the examination of standards, the credibility of tertiary teachers, internationalisation of curricula, globalisation, new technological developments, rapidly changing modes of delivery (e.g., flexible and online), issues of plagiarism and copyright, and maintenance of quality and international standards. Credibility issues come into play when one examines the qualifications and ongoing professional development of tertiary teachers. Internationally in the past decade there have been several examples of initiatives that require formal professional accreditation and registration of tertiary teachers. Two United Kingdom initiatives include that of the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) and
Institute of Learning and Teaching (ILT). One of the six value statements made by SEDA is that of ‘Scholarship, professionalism and ethical practice’. In the Australasian context, the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) Fellowship Scheme provides a legitimate avenue for accreditation and professional registration. One HERDSA criterion is that: ‘The needs of different students/participants are recognised and they are supported in their learning’. The Canadian, Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE), advocates nine ethical principles in university teaching that define the professional responsibilities of university teachers, ‘ways in which academic freedom can be exercised in a responsible manner’:

- Content competence,
- Pedagogical competence,
- Dealing with sensitive topics,
- Student development,
- Dual relationships with students,
- Confidentiality,
- Respect for colleagues,
- Valid assessment of students, and
- Respect for institution.

All of these initiatives and professional bodies (e.g., the American Psychological Association and the American Sociological Association) providing guidelines for higher education teachers and staff developers make overt references to the ethical conduct of teachers. Other examples of international initiatives that bring ethical conduct of higher education teachers into focus are the 1997 and 1998 UNESCO conferences on higher education. Article 2 of the ‘World Declaration on Higher Education for 21st Century Vision and Action’ (UNESCO, 1998) makes explicit reference to the ‘Ethical role, autonomy, responsibility and anticipatory function’. Campbell (2002) at the UNESCO conference articulated the need for ethical principles which should include: human rights, employee/labour rights, transparency, information, integrity and honesty, respect for cultural diversity and recognition of/sensitivity to cultural and social impact.

**Cultural considerations/Ethical implications relating to teaching and research**

Higher education staff are employed to teach, engage in research, and be involved in community service. Increasing demands made on staff time go beyond the teaching and research functions. Staff are also expected to, among other responsibilities engage in administrative functions, recruiting students, raising funds for research activities, monitor the relevance of their programmes, and ensure that teaching and learning is of a consistently high quality. The research scenario has changed. Funding is not easily accessible for research. Funds are limited and highly contested. Research is now a partnership between higher education and society. The community will not any longer allow researchers to come in and research to their heart’s content. There is the expectation that the community is no longer a subject of the research exercise, but a participant or partner in the research process, that there is an equal partnership. There is also the expectation of benefits for both parties. The researcher is expected to give something back to the community. The relationship should therefore not end when the research project ends. This has concomitant ethical and/or cultural implications for the teacher as researcher. To meet the highest ethical and scientific standards all teachers, researchers, and members of ethics committees should be fully conversant with the relevant ethical principles and requirements (Aarons, 2003).
The context for teaching and learning has also changed. As teachers we need to consider who our students are. What are their backgrounds, beliefs and world views? What is culturally ethically acceptable to them? How does the learning experience contribute to the achievement of the student learning outcomes and graduate attributes? We need therefore to consider the curriculum content, knowledge, learning experiences and assessment. It becomes important to expose students to various viewpoints and perspectives, provide opportunity for debate and discussion, so that the learning experience is one that results in the student having to make informed choices. Thorne and Saunders (2002) draw our attention to the influence of culture on an individual’s ethical reasoning process that precedes ethical actions. This has implications for how higher education institutions consider culturally appropriate mechanisms that generate compliance to desired ethical norms.

Many of the professions are calling for ethics to be taught across the curriculum rather than a separate course, (e.g., Balogh, 2002; Davis, 2003; Helweg, 1996; Stephan, 2001). At the 1999 UNESCO Science conference it was decided to strengthen the teaching of ethics. The World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) at the 2002 United Nations world conference on sustainable development was commissioned to action this declaration. This resulted in the paper, The Teaching of Ethics. With regard to teaching ethics Chesley and Anderson (2003) argue that business teachers cannot teach effectively unless they are/were in business. Students are exposed to ethical issues in a variety of scenarios when an integrative approach is used in teaching, and get the added benefit of a more thorough grounding in ethics when there is a compulsory course in the programme (Tan and Chua, 2000). Clarkeburn (2002) advocates the regular use of student-centred teaching involving students in ethical dilemma discussions to be most effective to teach ethics. There is, however no one right or correct way to teach or deal with ethical issues in the classroom. Instead of being evasive or avoiding the issue by changing the subject, it is best to tell students what you think and believe in as a result of your education and life experience.

Some common ethical dilemmas that face teachers in their teaching roles are:
- Balancing the personal and pedagogical roles, e.g., personal vs social, rigid vs flexible,
- Sensitivity to student characteristics, e.g., gender, race, class, sexual orientation, religion, or other personal attribute,
- Values of the discipline: promoting values in the curriculum, e.g., conservative, traditional vs progressive,
- Teaching of ethics in the curriculum,
- Assessing students’ knowledge/assimilation of ethics, and
- Standing by personal convictions, e.g., rights vs government/institutional viewpoints, or individualism vs community, e.g., individual gain vs greater good of society.

**Staff Development Units and Ethics: A case study**

In this section the role played by staff development units in the delivery of the ethics agenda is explored. The case of the University’s ethics policy, code and implementation are described. The Massey graduate attributes are similar to that expected by other higher education institutions. Graduates are expected to be socially responsible and conduct themselves ethically. The practice at Massey resembles practice in several higher education institutions. The *Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants* was developed to ensure that research, teaching and evaluation activities undertaken by staff and students are consistent with Section 6 of the Education Act 1989 which guarantees the freedom of academic staff to engage in research and to teach and assess.

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students in the manner, which they consider best, promotes learning. It also requires that institutions maintain the highest ethical standards and permit public scrutiny of the maintenance of those standards. The Code encompasses all activities that involve research that involves human participants, teaching that involves the participation of students for the demonstration of procedures or phenomena, which have a potential for harm, and any evaluation of services, practices or teaching programmes where information of a personal nature may be collected, staff may be identified or their performance commented on. The Code is an expression of the basic human rights of respect for persons, autonomy, privacy and justice, intended to provide protection for all participants in research, teaching and evaluation programmes, researchers and the University. The Code is based on eight ethical principles: respect for persons; minimisation of harm to participants, researchers, institutions and groups; informed and voluntary consent; respect for privacy and confidentiality; the avoidance of unnecessary deception; avoidance of conflict of interest, social and cultural sensitivity to the age, gender, culture, religion, social class of the subjects; and justice (Massey University Human Ethics Website).

At Massey the Training and Development Unit (TDU) is responsible for facilitating ethics training seminars since 1998. All staff conducting research with human participants are required by Academic Board to attend ethics training. The seminars aim to:
- Raise researchers’ awareness of ethical issues in the conduct of research involving human participants,
- Provide researchers with skills needed to undertake ethical analyses of proposed research involving human participants,
- Outline policy and procedures for gaining approval for research involving human participants, and
- Engage researchers in discussions of ethical issues in selected case studies.

Some issues that are discussed are the background to ethics in New Zealand, Massey policy and guidelines, the Code, cross-cultural consultation, researching with Maori, case studies and ethics applications. Staff indicated in feedback the need for refresher and/or additional seminars which explored ethics in greater depth. This resulted in two further seminars which aim to:
- Provide a philosophical background to research ethics,
- Update staff with international developments in the conduct of research involving human participants,
- Engage researchers in discussions of ethical issues and dilemmas they face,
- Highlight the points of view of research participants, and
- Raise researcher’s awareness of ethical issues in the conduct of research involving human participants from Maori and other cultural/ethnic communities in New Zealand, and internationally.

There are similar initiatives to meet the international requirement for ethics to be both a professional and academic component of higher education qualifications. The Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) in the United Kingdom ETHICS (Ethics Teaching Highlighted In Contextualised Scenarios) provides a database of case studies, examples of applied ethical problems used in teaching to highlight relevant principles using a pragmatic, embedded or theoretical approach. Staff development units also engage in educational development research and practice which involve both staff and students. They therefore need to be explicit in terms of ethical conduct of all activities. Monash University, for example,
spells out the internal working procedures for educational development in a ‘Statement on Ethical Conduct in Educational Development’.

Despite the fact that there are institutional mechanisms in place to provide guidance to the understanding of the ethics codes and its implementation, recent research indicates caution against some of the policy and support mechanisms in place, for example, Edwards et al (2004) provide a critique of the sometimes paternalistic approach of committees to reject research that posed risk to people competent to decide for themselves, Van Essen et al (2004) found in an Australia-wide survey of chairs of ethics committees varying degrees of familiarity with principles of natural justice, and even amongst scientific societies themselves there is a lack of research integrity in terms of rigorous assessment methods to determine their effectiveness (Iverson et al., 2003).

Leach and Harbin (1997) in their study of the ethics codes of 24 countries demonstrate the relationship of ethical codes to cultural values. They caution that any attempt at having consistent international foundation ethical guidelines must always be weighed against the culture-centred, ethical, decision-making, value and moral guidelines. The impact of ethical codes on staff behaviour is, however not adequately reported on in the literature according to Valentine and Fleischman (2002) who found that institutions that had ethics codes and provided training, had staff who were more tolerant of diversity than those that did not have ethics codes.

**Conclusion: Challenges facing teachers in higher education**

In this paper the role of higher education in developing a knowledge society, the cultural and ethical implications relating to teaching and research, and the role of SDU’s in the delivery of the ethics agenda has been explored. The challenge that still faces us is the extent to which what and how we teach/research contributes to students achieving the learning outcomes and being able to perform as citizens of society in a culturally, ethical and appropriate manner. Are our graduates knowledgeable in their field of study or profession? Or do they possess the wisdom to perform responsibly and conduct themselves in ethically/culturally appropriate ways? Like Socrates who wondered whether virtue could be taught, the question raised by Marino (2004) is whether we can teach ethics. He concludes that ‘Unless our ethics students learn to examine themselves and what they really value, their command of ethical theories and their ability to think about ethics from diverse perspectives are not likely to bring them any closer to being willing and able to do the right thing’.

It is important that SDU’s remain astute to the demands made on staff to deliver on the ethics agenda. SDU’s are well placed to engage staff in considering their students’ background, culture, and experience as the starting point in planning and preparing for teaching and research. Staff need to be aware of the ethics of their own profession of teaching in order for them to be viewed by students as credible in their attempt to inculcate the ethics of the respective professions. Graduates can only achieve the ethical attribute if the curriculum “itself is built upon sound ethical principles reflecting the interests of its major stakeholders … (in) an ethical university environment” (Carroll, 1997).

The following, however remain as challenges and issues that we as teachers and staff developers in higher education need to engage with:
- Do we agree that wisdom is a primary goal of higher education?
- How do we accommodate diversity and values in our classrooms?
• Should we give attention to the values of the indigenous peoples? If so how?
• Whose perspective are we taking in our teaching? A Eurocentric, Western, Eastern/Asian, African, Australasian, etc.?
• How do we teach ethics in higher education programmes? Do we teach Ethics as an elective or integrate it across the programme?
• How do we teach? What role does life experience/wisdom and culture play in our teaching?
• How do we teach for multiculturalism?
• How do we develop consensus on values in the classroom?
• How do these values relate to the values of higher education as an enterprise?
• What is the role of spirituality, religion and culture in contributing to the goals of higher education?

References

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