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HOW CAN BUSINESS EDUCATION DEVELOP ETHICAL PROFESSIONALS FOR EMPLOYERS?

Abstract: The implementation of any strategy needs professionals acting ethically, to meet the expectations of the society. To investigate how business educators can ensure that graduates will become ethical professionals, key instructors of an international business Bachelor programme at a Hungarian university were interviewed, since the link between professional ethics education and such undergraduate programmes was found as an under-researched topic. Our thematic content analysis revealed a non-systematic approach and a variety of practices concerning professional ethics education. The obtained results of our qualitative exploratory study, visualised by a word cloud and contrasted with Rest's Four Component Model, could support curriculum developers in integrating professional ethics into international business Bachelor programme, as well as provide opportunities for staff development programmes and further comparative research, both at national and international level.

Keywords: ethics education, international business education, professional ethics, curriculum development

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of ethics was one of the key developments in international business in the past 50 years, as per the reviewing of the academic literature by Kolk (2016). As for the most recent approaches, the ethical operation of the firms doing business across borders is viewed as a cornerstone of the international business system recommended by researchers, such as Chandler. According to him (2020), the central component of a "conscious capitalist system" is the values-based firm: business success is correlated highly with ethical behaviour. A corporation's strategy, which aims to achieve long-term business success, is supported by the appropriate behaviour of its people, and its moral contributions to society (Weiss 2014). Good strategy must encompass moral concerns, and the engagement of stakeholders also must be integral to a firm's strategy (Sonenshein 2009; Noland and Philips 2010). Some researchers even suggest a paradigm shift in business strategy, regarding the consideration of ethical issues (see Pirson and Lawrence 2010). The arguments include that unethical behaviour leads to loss of trust, tarnished corporate reputation, financial penalties and fines, as well as conviction and sentencing of corporate executives and employees (Ardichvili et al. 2012).
Organisations are advised to hire ethical people and to focus on moral characteristics, not just technical skills during recruitment (Bello 2012), as corporate ethics and financial performance are linked (Chun et al. 2013) and hiring the right people and keeping them leads to organisational stability, growth, and revenue (Cloutier et al. 2015). New hires are recommended to be evaluated for alignment of corporate and personal values and desired behaviours (Ardichvili et al. 2012), as the integration of both personal and professional ethics is important for integrity and success (Knapp et al. 2013).
Corporate leaders are expected to serve as role models to their employees (Bello 2012), as the leaders' ethical decision-making promote ethical behaviour internally (Thiel et al. 2012). Ethical leadership influence employee job satisfaction

and psychological well-being (Avey, Wernsing and Palanski 2012; Kalshoven and Boon 2012). Achieving the trust of their employees positively influences corporate social performance and individual behaviour, too (Hansen et al. 2011). Ethical thinking and behaviour can be learned, and this learning process is also expected to form an important part of organizational learning, with an ethical training for employees on all levels (Ardichvili and Jondle 2009). One of the most important tasks of leaders is to guide internal professionals and focus them on the mission and values of the company (Weiss 2014).

Since many employees and leaders of international companies have a business degree, our research focuses on how business education, more specifically an undergraduate degree programme focusing on international business, can develop the identity of future ethical professionals (see Falender and Shafranske 2007; Ametrano 2014) for such employers. First, we provide with a brief overview of the possible aims of, and solutions related professional ethics education in the academic literature. Then we present the context of our research: an exploratory study into how key instructors of an international business Bachelor programme at a Hungarian higher education institution see professional ethics education. We briefly summarise the previous step, where the definition of professional ethics education and the identification of the professions relevant for an international business Bachelor programme were discussed, as the results will be presented in detail in a forthcoming Hungarian publication. Then we look at their current practices, and at what they think about the ideal way of teaching professional ethics, with visual illustration of the key findings. Our conclusions at the end of this paper compare the answers with the academic literature and suggest ideas for curriculum and staff development.

2. PROFESSIONAL ETHICS EDUCATION

Individuals wishing to have a career in a profession need special education in the profession's unique ethical problems and the approaches to solving them (Trevino 1992). Concerning professional ethics in general, there is no consensus about the definition of professional ethics (Fox, Lonne and McDonald, 2001), but most of the proposed definitions in the academic literature refer to the appropriate behaviour of the member of a given profession (Poon and Hoxley, 2010). This appropriate behaviour was examined by researchers and evidence was found that it can be taught and developed over a lifetime of practice (Lesser et al. 2010). Regarding teaching of professional ethics, academic sources refer to two main approaches:

- the "code-centred", narrow approach, which focuses on the knowledge and application of the rules of the profession, and
- the broad approach, which includes the narrow one but goes beyond it, and considers the context and character of the professional (Bagnall 1998, Banks 2008).

As for the narrow approach, where ethics education focuses only on the knowledge and application of the rules of the profession, researchers found that such learning is insufficient for becoming an ethical professional (Holmes 2015). This finding raises the question what the relevant aims of professional ethics education can be, when educators would like to go beyond knowledge and application of the rules of the profession. The development of a professional identity is recommended to be a very important objective of higher education (Cruess, Cruess and Steinert, 2019), and Rest's Four Component Model (FCM) suggested four inter-related aims for such professional ethics education, which could address the elements of the broad approach:

- moral awareness – supporting learners to be able to recognise ethical problems,
- moral reasoning – supporting learners to be able to formulate a morally defensible action,
- moral motivation – supporting learners to be committed to act ethically, and
- moral implementation – supporting learners to have the courage to implement the right action (Bebeau, Rest and Narvaez 1999).

According to Rest's colleagues, led by Bebeau, these four components can be regarded as capacities to be developed, and they found evidence of the development of these inter-related moral capacities. Their research also led to a set of recommendations for educators, in relationship with methods and techniques of an effective professional ethics education programme. They recommended a pervasive approach to professional ethics during a formal learning programme, such as an international business Bachelor programme: further to a separate ethics course, ethical issues are also recommended to be addressed in various compulsory, programme-specific courses. This would also include experiential learning elements, such as internships or simulations (Bebeau and Monson 2008). An integrated approach to assessment of professional ethics within and across the formal learning programme was also recommended by researchers, as well as the importance of the continuous preparation of the instructors for this integrated approach and the institutional "milieu", meaning the ethical operations of all units of the higher education institution. (Bebeau and Monson 2008; Nucci 2001; Yazdani and Imanipour 2016; Wright 1995). Regarding this ethical milieu, an interesting recent development is the emergence of the need for being compliant with export control regimes in academia, which also poses new ethical challenges the employees of higher education institutions involved in internationalisation need to be prepared for (see Andrási, Csekő and Budai 2022; Csekő and Juhász, 2022).

Those who focused specifically on effective business ethics education unsurprisingly had very similar findings. Researchers found evidence of learning (although not a concluding one, see e.g. Jewe, 2008), showing that business ethics education have a positive influence on moral behaviour (Lau, 2010; May, Luth and Schwoerer, 2014). The

recommended aim of business ethics education is in line with the broad approach: developing professional identity of future business practitioners, not just teaching the relevant rules and their application. These researchers also recommended a holistic, integrated business ethics education with a separate course on business ethics, the integration of business ethics into various other courses, extracurricular events, involvement of business practitioners as guest speakers, using case studies, as well as experiential and action learning projects (Chavan and Carter 2018; Maclagan 2012; Swanson and Fisher 2009; Swanson and Fisher 2010; Tello et al. 2013). Overall, researchers argued that higher education institutions delivering business programmes have the power and the responsibility to deliver effective business ethics education with an impact on the society: going beyond supporting the learning of better ethical decision making, rather to build a better world (Acevedo 2013, Floyd et al. 2013, Giacalone and Promislo 2013). This is also in line with the expectations of the international accreditation bodies, such as the AACSB (see e.g. Andrási, Körtvési and Szegedi 2022).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

Concerning our research methodology, it is in line with the constructivist research paradigm: we are exploring experiences, perceptions, and opinions of individuals regarding professional ethics education in an international business Bachelor programme. Our aim is not to verify a hypothesis, but to better understand these 'constructs' (Walliman 2011).

We used a qualitative methodology to conduct our research, as we looked for correlations and drew conclusions. The main advantages of in-depth interview research are that it is much more detailed than a questionnaire and allows for a more in-depth exploration of the interviewee's views, and, as with a questionnaire, there is no external pressure, no outsider present during the interview, and therefore the interviewee can open up more easily and is more likely to give honest answers (Malhotra, 2009).

There are different forms of interview depending on how structured it is. Based on this, there are structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews (Berg and Lune, 2012). To the purpose of this research, the semi-structured interview was found appropriate, as it aims at a thorough understanding of the individual perspectives of the interviewees and requires a detailed information gathering. We collected new data by the semi-structured interviews regarding existing practices, which were not investigated before, as well as explored the interviewees' thoughts and beliefs about professional ethics education in the context of an international business Bachelor programme. Our interviews were typically 35-40 minutes in duration. The interviewees were identified based on the nature of the topic as senior lecturers in various subject areas of the international business Bachelor programme. In total, 10 people were interviewed, who teach across the curriculum and have extensive experience in designing and delivering courses belonging to the international business Bachelor programme. The interviews were recorded on live video, thus preserving some of the personal nature of the conversation, allowing us to see each other and each other's reactions. The characteristics of semi-structured in-depth interviews were considered throughout the process. The interviews were in Hungarian, and we translated the answers into English for the article.

After data cleaning, the research corpus formed the basis for the content analysis phase. The interviews were conducted based on an interview schedule, which allowed for a uniform processing of the information. Content analysis according to Krippendorff (2018) is a complex technique through which the researcher interprets and evaluates not only the text but also the context of the text. It involves systematically categorizing and interpreting the content of communication to identify patterns, themes, and meanings. Content analysis can provide insight into people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, which was the best interpretation for our current exploratory study. This enabled the exploration and identification of factors relevant to the research based on the narratives. We identified keywords and common elements in the answers, and afterwards, according to these, we also identified the main themes relevant for grouping the current practices and the methods and techniques deemed ideal by the respondents for teaching professional ethics in an international business Bachelor programme. Finally, we chose Rest's FCM for benchmarking the answers to see how current and proposed practices can lead to development of ethical professionals: whilst the model is not widely accepted, there are relevant empirical evidence and good practices of using it in academic programmes (see Hamilton, Monson and Organ 2012, Regan and Sachs 2016).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our research project focuses on teaching professional ethics during an international business Bachelor programme, which is an under-researched topic. We found no academic sources focusing on teaching professional ethics specifically such undergraduate programmes, as researchers rather dealt with postgraduate international business and management programmes and the tendency of using group projects related to CSR and sustainability during these programmes (see Christensen et al.,2007); or argued for teaching contemporary business ethics problems in international context (see Hurn, 2008; and Kline, 2010), which indicate that international business programmes would need to prepare for ethical conduct in a variety of business-related professions. To fill a gap in the academic literature concerning teaching

professional ethics during an international business Bachelor programme, we started an exploratory research project, interviewing senior key instructors of such programme at a Hungarian university. Our interviews focused on two dual elements: the basic terminology (the definition of professional ethics and the identification of the relevant professions), and the teaching practices (the existing practices and the identification of the 'ideal' ones).

Concerning the first dual element related to the basic terminology, we asked for the interviewees' opinion on the definition of professional ethics, and on the specific professions the International Business undergraduate programme prepares the students for. The reason of this element was that there is no consensus in the academic sources concerning the definition of professional ethics (see section 2 earlier), and that there is a gap in the literature regarding teaching professional ethics in international business Bachelor programmes, as mentioned above. The answers of the interviewees showed that there is no consensus about the definition of professional ethics among these faculty members either, as both the narrow and the broad approach were represented in the answers. A variety of professions were also mentioned as the ones the international business Bachelor programme prepares the students for, without any consensus here either. The answers related to this first element were discussed in a forthcoming Hungarian paper, concluding that programme directors would need a thorough analysis of the related professions, followed by discussions with the faculty members to have a common understanding of the ethical issues related to professions the international business Bachelor programme prepares the students for (Andrási and Czeglédi, 2023 forthcoming).
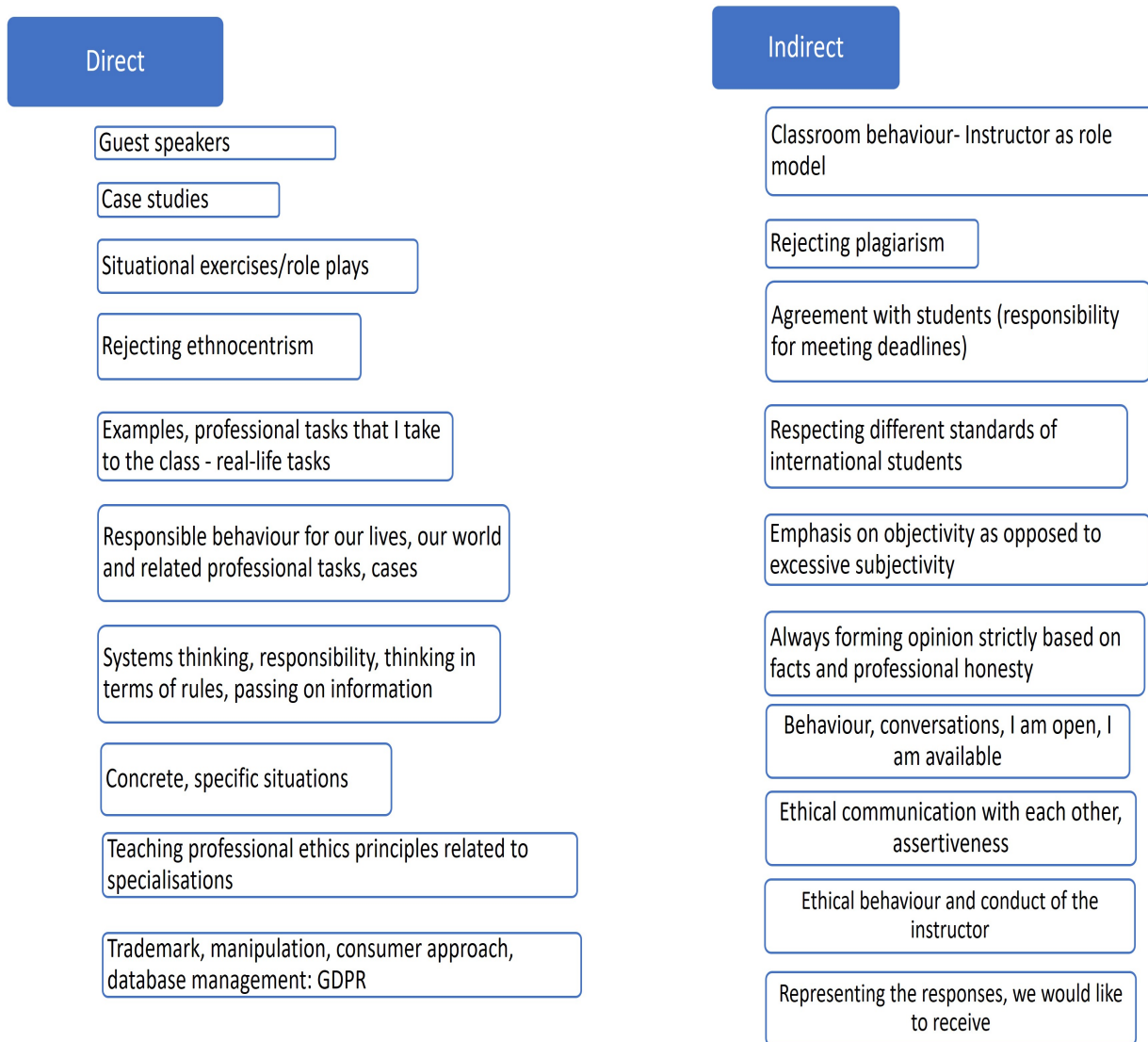
As for the second dual element related to the teaching of professional ethics, we inquired about current solutions of the faculty members, what they identified as their current relevant teaching methods and practices. Finally, we asked about their opinion on what would be the 'best' way to teach professional ethics during an international business Bachelor programme. The analysis of their answers is detailed in the next sections.

4.1. Current practices of key instructors

The current practices of the senior faculty members teaching across the international business Bachelor programme could be divided into two groups, as per their focus (see the key expressions of the responses appearing in groups in Picture 1 below). One group is the way of transferring knowledge directly to the students by various methods and techniques. Many interviewees mentioned the use of case studies, inviting guest speakers, using real life examples and role plays, and reference to professional norms for knowledge transfer (Interview 1, Interview 6, Interview 7, Interview 8, Interview 9). Discussion of specific topics related to the very course from ethical perspective, such as ethnocentric approach in marketing (Interview 7), manipulation of customers and usage of data (Interview 10) also belong to the area of direct knowledge transfer.

The indirect group is rather about how the instructor as role model can represent professional conduct and ethical behaviour by ways of communication, openness, consistently applying academic rigour regarding referencing and meeting deadlines. All ten interviewees referred to these indirect ways, and one of them specifically mentioned the importance of considering multiculturalism in the classroom because of the diversity of the students (Interview 3). According to the experiences of our interviewees such combination of direct and indirect ways provides better and more effective learning experience for the student, helping them in interiorising the proper behaviour for their future career.

It is apparent from the answers that every interviewee has developed their own solutions for teaching professional ethics: some of them focused on transferring knowledge related to ethical rules of one or more professions, and all of them referred to solutions related to representing professional conduct in the classroom. According to their own experiences, as well as to anecdotal evidence related to formal or informal feedback of the students, these solutions of theirs work well, could even be regarded as 'good practices'. These answers evidently show a non-systemic approach to professional ethics education, there is no sign of an integrated approach at programme level, as suggested by researchers. There is no common understanding of what works well, and there are no concerted efforts on individual or group planning, nor on sharing experiences: there is room for improvement, in terms of staff development. Collecting and discussing good practices, trying out solutions of others, or even developing a formal training on this topic are all opportunities for developing the faculty members' understanding and delivery of professional ethics-related methods and techniques. Staff development was eventually mentioned as an important element of the 'ideal' way of teaching professional ethics (see the next section).

Direct

Guest speakers

Case studies

Situational exercises/role plays

Rejecting ethnocentrism

Examples, professional tasks that I take to the class - real-life tasks

Responsible behaviour for our lives, our world and related professional tasks, cases

Systems thinking, responsibility, thinking in terms of rules, passing on information

Concrete, specific situations

Teaching professional ethics principles related to specialisations

Trademark, manipulation, consumer approach, database management: GDPR

Indirect

Classroom behaviour- Instructor as role model

Rejecting plagiarism

Agreement with students (responsibility for meeting deadlines)

Respecting different standards of international students

Emphasis on objectivity as opposed to excessive subjectivity

Always forming opinion strictly based on facts and professional honesty

Behaviour, conversations, I am open, I am available

Ethical communication with each other, assertiveness

Ethical behaviour and conduct of the instructor

Representing the responses, we would like to receive

Picture 1: Direct and indirect ways of teaching professional ethics
Source: Own research (Infographic)

4.2. Ideas for teaching professional ethics within an international business bachelor programme

Our interviewees were also asked about their opinion on the 'ideal' way of teaching professional ethics within an international business Bachelor programme. The responses are displayed in a word cloud, where the most frequently mentioned key expressions appear in larger fonts (see Picture 2 below). It is apparent from the word cloud that the most frequently mentioned methods and techniques as ideal ones for teaching professional ethics are simulations, case studies and projects (Interview 1, Interview 2, Interview 3, Interview 6, Interview 7, Interview 10), highlighting the support for an applied, problem-based, and practice-oriented approach to teach professional ethics. The use of codes of ethics of relevant professions (Interview 2, Interview 4, Interview 10) and classes with small groups (Interview 3, Interview 5, Interview 7) also related to such approach. Two interviewees referred to the importance of integrating professional ethics into every course of the academic programme (Interview 1, Interview 4, Interview 5). Some respondents referred to short trips and excursions (Interview 1, Interview 10), the use of traditional tests and quizzes (Interview 10), as well as the need for professional development of instructors in this regard (Interview 6). One interviewee also referred to non-cognitive elements such as emotional intelligence and "making the good things part of our soul" (Interview 9).

Like in the case of the existing practices above, the ideas for teaching professional ethics as 'ideal' solutions also varied. The integrated approach, expressed as infusing international business courses with topics related to professional ethics, appears among the ideas, in line with the suggestions of researchers. Experiential learning, as suggested by Bebeau and others (see section 2), is highlighted as an important teaching method: the link with future employers in the format of real-life case studies, as well as exposing students to real-life situations via simulations are the most frequently mentioned ideas. Regarding the Four Component Model described in Section 2 earlier, ideas such as the trips or the projects are helpful in motivating the students to do, and in providing them with opportunities for implementing the

'right thing'. The reference to the relevant professions confirms the need for identifying the professions the international business Bachelor programme prepares the students for. Finally, as mentioned at the end of the previous section, formal staff development supporting professional ethics education within the programme is described as a desired element of an 'ideal' situation.

Picture 2: The interpretation of the ideal to teach professional ethics in higher education
Source: Own research (Wordart)

5. CONCLUSION

As the title of this paper shows, our research focused on how business education, most specifically international business Bachelor programmes can develop ethical professionals for employers. Graduates of these academic programmes will become members of various professions, as well as employees, and later leaders at various organisations. As per our literature review, their conduct is key in achieving the strategic goals of their employer, and the development of their professional identity is an important task of higher education. Due to the gap in the academic literature on teaching professional ethics within international business Bachelor programmes, exploratory in-depth interviews were conducted with senior faculty members teaching across such an academic programme at a Hungarian higher education institution. Based on the qualitative analysis of the interviewees' responses, we found recurring patterns that helped us to identify the main characteristics of existing practices, and to compare the interviewees' opinion on the 'ideal' way of teaching professional ethics with recommendations of researchers.

Based on the results of this research, we can conclude that current practices can be grouped into direct and indirect methods and techniques: the direct ones are about transferring knowledge related to professional ethics, while the indirect ways support students in the interiorisation of behaviour necessary for being successful in international business life. The various current practices mentioned by the interviewees can be linked with the components of the FCM, as the aims of their practices are about the development of moral awareness, reasoning, moral motivation, and moral implementation. However, no systematic approach or aligned pedagogic solutions were found in this regard, just individual practices based on the faculty members' own experiences. Therefore, our first main recommendation for programme directors and curriculum developers is to collect information about the existing practices, followed by sharing and discussing the results with faculty members to identify good practices and to encourage the usage of them.

The opinions on the 'ideal' way of teaching echoed the recommendations of researchers summarised in our literature review: professional ethics need to be integrated into the courses of the academic programme with a practical approach, using experiential learning elements to ensure the development of both cognitive and non-cognitive elements, forming an ethical professional identity. Our second recommendation is that programme directors and curriculum developers would need to look at their own programmes from such a holistic perspective and ensure alignment of course and programme outcomes with ethical expectations. Finally, formalised internal professional development focusing on the best practices is the third recommendation, which is also in line with both the recommendations of researchers and the interviewees' opinions.

Our exploratory investigation supports many recommendations of the researchers, as the interviewees' practices and ideas are in line with the suggested integrated approach. The international business Bachelor programmes may contribute well to ethical conduct of future members of various business professions, who, as employees and leaders at business organisations, are key to achieving strategic goals of these organisations.

The authors of this paper received very positive feedback from the interviewees, encouraging them to continue this research with comparative approach: further interviews are planned with instructors of other similar programmes, possibly in other countries, too. Sharing the respective practices among faculty members and using them for professional development seem to be way forward to develop ethical professionals for employers within international business Bachelor programmes.p

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