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Ethics practitioner' s reflections : integrating ethics into the university ecosystem : why? how? and who?

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**ETHICS PRACTITIONER'S REFLECTIONS:
INTEGRATING ETHICS
INTO THE UNIVERSITY ECOSYSTEM.
WHY? HOW? AND WHO?**

Divya Singh

Abstracto

Si se acepta que la función de la universidad es preparar a los graduados para que se integren y se conviertan en miembros de una sociedad cooperativa, entonces la forma en que los estudiantes se preparen para participar en un medio comunitario dictará, en gran medida, el tipo de sociedad en la que finalmente nos encontremos¹⁶. Es muy necesario entender la universidad como un microcosmos de la comunidad más grande y el impacto que una universidad puede tener en el progreso y la potenciación ética de la sociedad más amplia. En el presente artículo se expone la experiencia de Universidad de Sudáfrica (Unisa), que aprobó una estrategia que incluía la incorporación de una cultura ética compartida en la universidad y la de STADIO Holdings, una empresa de inversiones involucrada en la enseñanza superior

¹⁶ Divya Singh, Board Member of Globethics.net Foundation. Chief Academic Officer, Stadio Holdings Ltd; Former Vice Principal: Advisory and Assurance Services, University of South Africa.

privada en Sudáfrica, cuyo enfoque está centrado en los estudiantes y en la que se da prioridad a la importancia de integrar la responsabilidad ética y la conciencia social en el plan de estudios de enseñanza y aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: sociedad cooperativa, empoderamiento ético, cultura ética compartida, responsabilidad ética.

Abstract

If it is accepted that the function of the university is to prepare graduates to integrate and become members of a co-operative society, then how students are geared to participate in a communal milieu will, to a large extent, dictate the type of society in which we eventually find ourselves. It is so necessary to understand the university as a microcosm of the bigger community and the impact that a university can have on the progress and ethical empowerment of the broader society. This article presents the experience of the University of South Africa (Unisa), which has approved a strategy that included embedding a shared ethical culture in the university; and the experience of STADIO Holdings, an investment company involved in private higher education in South Africa, which is focused in the students and prioritizes the importance of integrating ethical responsibility and social consciousness into teaching and learning curriculum.

Key words: co-operative society, ethical empowerment, shared ethical culture, ethical responsibility.

There is a well-known expression which reminds us: “We have not inherited this earth from our fathers, we are just borrowing it from our children!”. If indeed it is only on loan to us, then as responsible citizens it behoves us to ensure that we leave it in good condition, but the available research tells the opposite story.

The full blame for this unfortunate global reality cannot be laid solely at the doors of the university, but without doubt, as institutions of learning, universities should accept some responsibility, especially as universities are assessed through the lens of graduate attributes and contributions. How many universities can, with unequivocal assurance, lay claim to the statement that its graduates are all socially conscious, responsible citizens? Another way to frame the question is: Is it the responsibility of the university to ensure that its students are ethical citizens and understand the meaning of social norms and values?; or is the role of the university only to produce experts with high levels of discipline-specific knowledge without the emphasis on holistic development?

There is no gainsaying that society has in many respects become somewhat distorted – we appreciate power, profits, and development is measured in terms of market capital and market share, which is why the powerful thrive, corruption has become endemic and consequences are few. Discussions on integrity, sustainability and accountability have become the sounds on the fringes, and it against that backdrop that I invite all thought-leaders, the right-thinking and the right-minded to look at how we are preparing our graduates. I do not for a moment believe that social consciousness and ethical behaviour start at the university – it should begin in the home and in the schools, when this does not happen, then universities cannot say “it is not my function”.

At a more granular level, one could ask: Why should I respect other people, or why should I treat other with dignity? We respect others and treat one another with dignity because we know that it is the right thing to do. Similarly, if it is accepted that the function of the university is to prepare graduates to integrate and become members of a co-operative society, then how students are geared to participate in a communal milieu will, to a large extent, dictate the type of society in which we eventually find ourselves.

When the Council of the University of South Africa (Unisa) approved a strategy that included embedding a shared ethical culture in the university, the first actions at the operational level included a collective conceptualization of the institutional ethics agenda, and then a stakeholder participatory process of developing the plan to integrate it across the institution. Critical to the planning was the assurance that the necessary resources would also be committed to the project because the one truth that was quickly realised is that effectively promoting and integrating the ethics culture is a costly and resource-intensive initiative. Furthermore, reporting lines are crucial and stressing the significance of the project, Unisa positioned the Ethics Office as a direct report in the Vice Chancellor's Office.

Concomitantly, but at the strategic level, there was also an evaluation of the institutional vision and mission, as well as the approved organizational values to assess coherence and alignment with the newly proposed ethics agenda. Thirdly, there was a survey amongst institutional stakeholders to gauge perceptions on the how the leadership was seen to live the vision, mission and values. We've all heard the expression "the tone is set from the top" and "the fish rots from the head" – it was therefore a priority for the success of the project that the leadership and management team were seen to both talk-the-talk AND walk-the-talk. One intervention, emphasizing accountability, is a Management Pledge signed by all members of the management team and published.¹⁷

Accepting that leading the ethic programme and issues of accountability are serious matters, nowhere is it written that they cannot

¹⁷ An example of a management mantra might be: Be honest and do what you say you will do. If you are not able to meet a promise, admit it and have the courage to explain why. Be - and be seen to be – consistent... it is crucial to be acknowledged as dependable and reliable.

be boosted with creative and entertaining activities to attract the participation of staff, who are often already harassed by the 'busy-ness' of the university activities. At Unisa, complementing the formal project, we created a mascot - Ms "E. T. HICS" (who became known as Mizzity) - and we held industrial theatre with a Mizzity lookalike to spread the ethics message. Mizzity had her own blog and Complaints Line and, quite interestingly, we found that staff would often much rather "talk to Mizzity" than use the formal university channels. Mizzity engaged the Vice Chancellor on ethical issues, and we held Mizzity ethics discussions called "pop-in-for-ethics" where all participants were given a bag of freshly made popcorn and an apple. (I'm not sure if it was the discussions or the smell of the popcorn floating down the passages, but these discussions were very popular, and the message widely spread.) The apples were deliberately chosen as symbolic of the participants being recognised as the "good apples" in the Unisa barrel. Throughout the year, Mizzity paraphernalia with the Ethics Office contact details was distributed to staff and, in winter, Mizzity handed out scarves and gloves to everyone attending her shows. While there were some staff members who thought it was all too frivolous, the fact is that within a short space of two years almost everyone at the institution knew Mizzity and the ethics imperative.

Entrenching and integrating the ethics programme was hard work and required real commitment. Not everyone bought into the programme equally, but with perseverance we found that generally staff wanted to feel consulted, engaged and part of the programme - and once this was achieved, it became much easier to work on the more difficult elements of furthering the ethics culture and with it, those key values of accountability and responsibility.

While the tone from the top as an important driver, building the ethical culture in the university is not only a management responsibility. The important message to share is that everyone can be a leader in their

respective spaces. We built a virtual Wall of Fame and later a Wall of Shame and staff were invited to nominate the ethical heroes and heroines and their names and photos would be placed on the Wall of Fame. Contrarily, where staff members conducted themselves in a manner opposing the institutional ethics and value system, they found themselves on the Wall of Shame. All photos were up for 3 months before being removed.

As part of the staff development and training programme, Unisa developed its own online ethics-related modules on specific topics which were compulsory for all staff and the ethics discourse was an important part of the onboarding programme for all new staff so that they were immediately alerted to the institutional values.

A further principle was the acknowledgement that everyone in the organisation – irrespective of position - is held equally accountable. Expectations should not be seen to be negotiable and it must be clear that the same standards are expected from everyone.

In 2017 I resigned from Unisa and joined STADIO Holdings, an investment company involved in private higher education in South Africa. At STADIO, our focus is on our students with a prioritisation on the importance of integrating ethical responsibility and social consciousness into our teaching and learning curriculum. In ancient Greek, Aristotle emphasised concept of ‘practical wisdom’ or “phronesis” and this has been STADIO’s pivot in setting its teaching and learning agenda.

According to Wikipedia, phronesis describes a type of wisdom or intelligence that is more specifically relevant to practical action, implying both good judgement and excellence of character and habits, or practical virtue. It leads to breakthrough thinking and creativity and enables the individual to discern and make good judgements about what is the right thing to do in a situation. (<https://www.oxford-review.com>). Interpreting what this may mean for our students at STADIO, we

developed a compulsory short module covering (i) ethics and values, (ii) sustainability, (iii) entrepreneurship, (iv) conflict resolution - and because we have a strong Continental commitment – (v) pride in Africa and poverty alleviation. The idea is to introduce these values and raise awareness amongst students, but we are also reviewing all our programme curricula against an agreed matrix to ensure that ethics, sustainability and corporate citizenship are integrated in all the programmes and that they are part of the content that is formally assessed. The endgame will be to separately badge our students for competency and achievement when they leave our institution.

Conclusion

Today, with the widespread global crises, it is easy to lament: “How are all these bad things happening to us?” But David Meltzer suggests a much better question: “How is this happening through us?” He points out that if we understand that things happen through us, it places us in a much better position of accountability “because you realise immediately that we have choices – we can be either part of the problem or part of the solution ... and it is this simple awareness that can make all the difference”.¹⁸

It is so necessary to understand the university as a microcosm of the bigger community and the impact that a university can have on the progress and ethical empowerment of the broader society. It would therefore be most remiss were I to conclude without raising the issue of technological disruption and the ethics of AI and machine learning that is becoming the rage at many of our universities. Our challenge will be

¹⁸ Meltzer, David (2018), “Life Doesn't Happen 'to' You: Accountability and Perspective”, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/320226> (accessed 12 May, 2020).

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to balance the competing priorities, taking the best from both without compromising that which makes us human.