Work Placement Influences on Students’ Perceptions of Ethics and Values

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Students undertaking work placements as part of work integrated-education programmes are situated in a relevant community of professional practice and over the course of the placement exposed to situations that are ethical in nature. It is through these experiences that students shape and understand their own identity as professionals. Increasingly the literature identifies the importance of values education, enhancing ethical knowledge and conduct, and professional identity development (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011a; Herkert, 2000; Keown, Parker, & Tiakiwai, 2005; Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2011). Universities are under increasing pressure to develop work-ready graduates (Archer & Davison, 2008; Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011), and with the focus on graduate outcomes, a move towards developing ethically and socially aware graduates (Barrie, 2004). However, teaching ethics and values is fraught with difficulties (Bowie, 2005) and teaching ethics is largely limited to raising awareness rather than causing action (Spier, 2002).

Inherent in discussion around ethics and values is the concept of professionalism, and it is our position that for someone to act professionally implies that this person must also be acting in an ethical manner. Students engaged in undergraduate studies tend to have narrow conceptualisation of professionalism (Grace & Trede, 2011), including professional ethics and workplace values. The literature argues that to have effective enhancement of professional ethics development, then professional identity development and professional ethics must be embedded into the curriculum (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011b; Trede, 2012) and must recognise that student prior identity development is strongly related to how student engage with professional work-life (Reid, Dahlgren, Peticz, & Dahlgren, 2008).

AIMS AND METHODS

The aim of this study is to investigate student’s pre- and post-placement understandings and experiences of professional ethics, values, and decision-making as part of a work integrated-education program. This study includes several different disciplines across two universities, University of Waikato and Griffith University. The study is on-going and reported here are only the findings for the Science and Engineering students perceptions prior to undertaking a work placement.

Data was collected using surveys before placement and interviews in the first week of placement. The study used an online survey instrument asking to respond, using ordinal 10 point Likert scales (where 10 = strong agree), to a number of statements and respond to case study examples. For the questions exploring who influenced their personal values development, Likert scales of 1-5 were used. Surveys invitations were sent electronically to a class of 119 pre-placement students, which provided a 26% response rate (n = 31), a response rate not unusual for a lengthy online survey without incentives (Deutsken, de Ruyter, Wetzels, & Oosterveld, 2004; Dillman et al., 2009). The interview data was collected using 45-minute semi-structured face-to-face interviews, utilising four self-volunteered participants. Interviews were audio recorded and thematically analysed. This research has ethical approval from the University of Waikato and Griffith University ethics committees.

RESULTS

All but two survey participants had previous work experience in an unrelated field to their studies, with five indicating that they also had completed some related work. When the survey Likert data was subjected to the Cronbach’s Alpha test, the results indicated strong internal consistency with low variance (α = 0.92; SD = 2.01).
Students strongly believed that parents/caregivers had most influenced their personal values development (Likert 4.61 out of 5), followed by their friends/peers (Likert 3.32), and wider family (Likert 3.06). However, they tended to be unsure or disagreed that prior workplaces (Likert 2.94 out of 5), teachers/lecturers (Likert 2.65), media (Likert 2.19), community leaders (e.g., coaches, youth leaders) and wider community (Likert 2.13), and religious leaders (Likert 1.68) had influenced their personal values development. Of the participants, 12% indicating they regularly attended religious service, which correlated ($r^2 = .61; p < .05$) to their view of religious leaders having influenced their values.

Most students indicated they had a good understanding of their own values (Likert 7.61 out of 10) and believed it was important to understand one’s own values (Likert 8.35). Most students did not think they often struggled to determine the ethical good decision (Likert 3.42), however, indicated that others around them did struggled (Likert 5.03) more than they did. Students were also not convinced that society generally had good values (Likert 5.10). There is a tendency for individuals who strongly believed that it is good ethical practice to strictly adhere to codes to also strongly agree ($p < .05$) that following the law is always right and that adherence to codes is more important now than before.

Students were unsure if they had a sound understanding of their professional values (Likert 5.83 out of 10) and thought professional ethics were complex (Likert 6.73). All students agreed that their personal values will inform their professional values (Likert 7.80) and most thought they will be able to adhere to their personal values during their placement (Likert 7.53). Even though students thought it was particularly important to adhere to a code of ethics (Likert 8.57), they held divergent views if good ethical practice requires strict adherence to codes (43% strongly agree, 31% strongly disagree, 26% unsure). Students tended to believe they would speak up for what is right even if it offends (Likert 7.23), however, in the survey example of a colleague unfairly, publically, and harshly rebuked for a mistake, only 40% said they would speak up (27% would not, 33% were unsure). Students also tended to be unsure if they could positively change the ethical behaviour in the workplace (Likert 5.93).

**DISCUSSION**

One’s own self-identity, and personal disposition and values framework within, builds up over time from experience and personal reflections (Bowie, 2005; Nystrom, 2009), and is used as an interpretive lens to understand the world around them (Billett, 2006; Campbell, 2009). When asked who influenced the development of their personal values, the results indicate that, aside from family and friends, students did not see any other person(s) as a significant factor of influence. However, literature has long argued that teachers (Weissbourd, 2003; Yost, 1997) and media (Entman, 1989) have significant influence, and the results here suggest that students have not appreciated the complex, long-term development of their dispositions. To best understand this lack of awareness, Foucault’s constructs of governance and power need to be considered, where it is argued people comply, often unknowingly and uncritically, to the socially dominant positions. When explored further in interviews, some interviewees explained they developed their own values framework, that is, as an internal reflective cognitive process rather than one significantly influenced by external factors. However, given the difficulty students had answering these interview questions and lack of recognition of other influential factors, it may indicate that the influences on their value/s framework development had mostly been an implicit learning development, influenced from both external (but, to them, not explicitly noticeable) factors and internal cognitive processes.

In the survey, students perceived that they mostly did not struggle in determining good ethical decisions, but did more strongly believe ($p < .01$) that the people around them tended to struggle. Given that their peers were part of the same sampling group, it implies that individual students tend to hold a higher view of their own ethical capacity than that of others. This implication is supported by that students also held a significantly ($p < .05$) stronger views that they ‘behaved ethically’ than compared to the view that ‘society had generally good values’. Such positioning presents a significant challenge for ethics education as there may be reluctance to have personal positions challenged because of the belief that they are already ethically superior to the others around them and, thus, their externally offered alternatives.

Most students thought that their professional values would stem from codes and regulations (seconded only to personal values) and thought it was important to adhere to a code of ethics. The later likely reflects the practice, particularly for engineering, of emphasising the importance of professional code of ethics in conversations around ethical conduct. However, interestingly, students separated into distinct opposing groups on the view if good ethical practice requires strict adherence to codes. The view by some that strict adherence is not required

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may be better understood when considering the positive, but not overwhelming, responses to the question if they struggled to determine the ethically good choice (indicating some struggles). Interview data suggested the struggle to determine the right ethical choice was mostly in complex social situations where it was difficult to determine which choice causes the ‘greater good’ and when the significance of the impact of the decision on other individuals were taken in consideration. That is, when different desirable values conflict and adherence to a list of values (or codes) may not cause a decision that serves the greater good. Such thinking may broadly be considered as a ‘consequential ethics’ framing. Likely, it is the conflict between this personal framework and the duty bound concept of a code of ethics that was the source of the struggle.

Prior to commencing the work placement, students almost unanimously thought it was important to understand their professional values, however, considered professional ethics to be complex and were unsure if they had a good understanding of their professional values. The literature discusses the need for young professionals to be moral agentic in their workplace and to have voice (speak up) at the times when required (Billett, 2009). However such voice needs to be mindful of the positions of workplace power (Spencer, 1981), particularly as students are in a position of lesser power. Students did indicate a readiness to speak up, however, this contrasts to the 60% that indicated in the example that they either would not speak up or were unsure. Similarly, students believing that they adhered to good ethical behaviour, however, were not convinced they would positively impact the ethical behaviour in the workplace. Likely, these dissonances stems from several sources, such as the expected differing positions of workplace power, the perceived complex nature of professional ethics, the uncertainty of their own professional ethics, and how these would present in the workplace.

CONCLUSIONS

Even though most students felt they had a good understanding of their personal values and believed they behaved (mostly) ethically, they clearly felt unprepared for the complexities of professional ethics and workplace values. They held perceptions of uncertainty around their understanding of their own professional ethics and values, and were unsure how adherence might look as practice in the workplace. This highlights a need for preparation for professional ethics prior to commencing work placement. However, likely engaging in actual ethical practice in a workplace will grant the student the greatest learning experience which, when supported by structured post-placement reflection, will best enhance the overall learning experience and development.

This work is only at an early stage of a longitudinal study and it is intended further findings will inform Work-Integrated Learning practitioners and ethics educators on how to better cause greater student awareness of, and preparedness for, engagement with professional ethics in the workplace.

REFERENCES


