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Chapter

Academic Actions for Developing Ethics in Higher Education

Mónica-Priscila Avila-Larriva and Andrea-Cristina Vallejo-Sancho

Abstract

Higher education is fundamental for the development of honest professionals and citizens; each educational action is indeed ethical. From a philosophical and conceptual analysis of the relationship between ethics and education, this research aimed to define academic actions for developing ethics in higher education, identifying possible obstacles and proposing concrete actions for their implementation in praxis. This research is qualitative, documentary-descriptive, inductive, non-experimental, and cross-sectional through a bibliographic review based on scientific data. It is argued that academic management organised around an educational model oriented towards ethics, will guide teacher training programs for this purpose. For its effective implementation, it proposes mainstreaming ethics in the curriculum and the development of an Ethics Lecture or Chair, keeping in mind that teachers and institutional behaviour and actions, directly impact students' ability to be citizens guided by ethics.

Keywords: ethics, higher education, academic management, teacher training, mainstreaming

1. Introduction

The origins of Greek philosophy mark the end of the mythological imaginary and the triumph of the *logos*, which devotes all scientific efforts to understanding the reality from a rational point of view. Its etymological origin, from the Greek *ethos* (character or way of doing or acquiring things) [1], reminds us that ethics is not a convenience issue but a matter of good practices in all spheres of life; a reasonable discrimination between *good* and *evil* and the responsibility behind this; therefore, freedom plays a fundamental role in ethics.

Let us recall that Sartre states that humans have the freedom to act in the different orders of human behaviour [2] and that Hume maintains a moral theory based not only on reason but also on sentiment and benevolence, the foundation of the human righteous disposition. Hence, moral attitudes make it possible to build a just society [3]. In addition, ethics studies what is related to human dignity, embodied in human rights and reciprocal duties, from whose adequate protection derives peaceful coexistence [4].

To be ethical means to act with common sense in favour of collective construction, a condition that occurs in contact with agents of socialisation such as the family and educational spaces. However, as explained in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's

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superman does not accept supra terrestrial teachings but dictates his own will; that is, he decides his own moral code. Therefore, from his experiences, the human being questioned the norms, values, and principles—which constitute the transition to ethics: the ethics of a free man has nothing to do with punishments or rewards dictated by any authority, human, or divine [5].

The study associating ethics and education dates back several centuries. For Aristotle, phronesis was the wisdom based on the deliberative, social, and emotional skills we acquire when learning [6]. Therefore, the teaching-learning process of indisputable validity, becomes fundamental for its development. Higher education institutions, whose purpose lies in forming upright citizens with specific skills of their professional profile, must rethink the importance of ethics in its philosophical dimension and its implications in the academic sphere. In this sense, we must ask ourselves, what are the educational actions for developing ethics in higher education?

This research aimed to identify the academic actions that would allow the development of ethics in higher education, starting from a philosophical reflection on it and analysing its links with education. Our working hypothesis proposed that ethics should be considered transversal to the university's academic actions, making teacher training and updating indispensable due to the centrality of their role and the institution's actions when facing the difficulties of their implementation in practice.

For identifying these actions, the problem was addressed through an analytical review of documentary sources from a qualitative approach[1], descriptive-inductive in scope, with a non-experimental, cross-sectional design. The information was in books, journals, scientific publications, digital databases, and reports for 12 years (2010–2022). A total of 80 texts were reviewed, of which 34 were taken as references.

2. Academic actions for the development of ethics

2.1 Ethics in higher education

Education is the sum of life experiences at the formal, informal, and non-formal levels; therefore, it is an ethical action since all actors involved can reflect permanently on it. In the educational context, the student is the centre of the teaching-learning process; all planning, curriculum, and management efforts will be directed towards him/her. Students should investigate, inquire, observe, and generate knowledge, and make the values and norms of the institution their own to demonstrate them in their personal and professional actions. Since ethics and academics are two human spheres that cannot be separated [9], students' professional training should not only include intellectual aspects but also values. Therefore, ethics is inherent to educational institutions and these, in each of their actions, should make their practice visible.

Despite the importance of implementing ethics in education, the practical difficulties of its implementation in the educational context have to be studied. Cliffe & Solvason [10] argue that talking about ethics in education is very complex due to the grayscale that can exist between ethics defined as "good" versus "bad," potentially resulting from power relations, which do not reflect what is ethical for the "other".

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[1] Qualitative research is based more on an inductive logic and process [7]. Qualitative research tries to identify the deep nature of realities, their dynamic structure, the one that gives a full reason for their behaviour and manifestations [8].

All educators should therefore consider the complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty of relating to "others"; thus, one can genuinely understand ethics rather than what one believes it should be [10]. It is argued that there are infinite ways of being and living ethically, so ethics can hardly be a list of actions or regulations. For this, teachers must be able to self-evaluate their actions critically and reflect on their practice, their relationships, and the impacts of their actions.

2.2 Academic management for teacher training in ethics

Having students at the center of the teaching-learning process implies establishing academic management strategies that make it possible to respond to the need to develop ethical, social, and citizenship skills [11]. A fundamental strategy is planned ongoing teacher training. The philosophy, principles, and values of an educational institution are expressed in its educational model. Implementation of ethics should therefore be visualised in this instrument, allowing teachers to integrate it into their planning within the framework of their academic freedom, and guiding teachers' training priorities.

The purpose of training lies in the deontological dimension within this knowledge society [12] and should allow the individual development of professional and ethical integrity and reflection on educational practice [10]. Therefore, it requires constant work and must be adapted to the context of a diverse, intercultural, and pluricultural world, which makes ethical dilemmas more complex. Continuous teacher training will enable their permanent reflection, their sensitivity closer to their immediate reality, and their adequate solvency to specific problems [13]. On the contrary, training and guidelines that fail to influence teachers' ethical attitudes [10] could further deprive them of tools for the complex dilemmas of ethics in education. Academic management should consider this and, taking into account the characteristics of Availability and Adaptability [14], generate mechanisms that allow constant collective reflection to ensure the defence and progressiveness of the right to education.

2.3 Mainstreaming ethics in the curriculum

Currently, there may be several obstacles to implementing ethics effectively in higher education [15]. The competitive model that demands compliance with metrics from universities detracts from the importance of comprehensive education, in which ethics is fundamental. In the Ecuadorian context, the modifications of the Academic Regulations in the Organic Law of Higher Education (LOES, by its Spanish acronym) in 2019 determined a minimum duration of eight academic terms, which caused many universities to prioritise professionalising subjects over general ones, including the study of ethics.

Implementing ethics as a specific subject is not an easily achievable action; however, a strong current suggests that this is the most suitable mechanism [16]. The transversal teaching of ethics in the different disciplines would seem distant or recent in some sciences. Even in professions with direct contact with other human beings, such as educators [17] or those in health areas, training in ethics has been relegated. For example, in 1993, Lawrence saw that for the Accounting career, introducing a specific subject on ethics for the profession did not impact students' ethical behaviour [18]. Therefore, creating ethics certifications for accountants is proposed as a solution, as it would make it possible to exert pressure for the curricular inclusion of ethics. However, this solution is given outside the student's standard process.

Moreover, there is a need for ethics to permeate all sciences since professionals must permanently face ethical dilemmas in their daily work. Even very technical sciences, such as Quantum Information Sciences, propose the transversal incorporation of critical discussions on the ethical problems linked to this field to resolve society's issues [19]. Then, mainstreaming ethics constitutes an alternative that allows each teacher to work his/her subject from ethical principles towards moral application in the student's professional life. Consequently, we propose implementing an Ethics Lecture or Chair through which policies and actions focused on ethical practice can be developed by students and faculty. This also implies having a new point of dialogue with the community for a more just and balanced society.

2.4 The teaching role for the practice of ethics

Although academic efforts in teacher training and mainstreaming of ethics are fundamental, teachers still resist its implementation [15] due to the lack of knowledge on the subject, the misperception of ethics as a subjective and religious discipline, the concern of its transversal implementation given the necessary expertise of teachers on the subject, the possible discussion strategies, and the effects on their interlocutors and on class time [19]. However, with no genuine teacher involvement and institutional commitment, implementing ethics in practice will not be effective. Therefore, teachers with an open mind, good attitude, and motivation are necessary [19]. These teachers should implement methodologies that respond to the approaches of the educational model, foster the development of critical thinking, and fundamentally guarantee academic freedom, which is a fundamental right for debate in a democratic context [20].

The teachers' ethical attitudes in other spheres should be added to fulfil these conditions [3, 21]. The teacher must be a leader in effectively handling educational and pedagogical management, be an example as a professional of integrity, and reflect on values and virtues with academic honesty. A qualified teacher takes responsibility for his or her conduct, shows solidarity and cordiality with colleagues, avoids unfair and indirect criticism, and promotes open communication [22].

Finally, the importance of evaluation as a practical tool that reflects the teacher's ethical attitude towards his/her students should not be forgotten. This should be seen as a systematic, reflective, permanent, and comprehensive process of formative and quality characteristics. It contemplates rigour in knowledge for detecting skills, difficulties, and strategies for their application [23].

2.5 The institutional role and ethical practice from the student's perspective

Just as the exercise of ethics requires the active involvement of teachers, it is essential to understand the students' vision to define actions that serve in practice [15]. It has been identified that when specific ethics subjects are proposed, many consider them useless, with ideal visions of problems that are solved in other ways in practice. In a world where corruption scandals are so common, it can be challenging to understand the need to act ethically. Ecuador, for example, has a Corruption Perceptions Index score of 36/100 [24]. Because of this, we consider it even more critical to mainstream ethics in the curriculum, identifying ethical dilemmas of the profession with real cases of decision-making.

Likewise, most students conceive higher education as an instrument to increase their employability rather than a space for comprehensive training [15]. For this, it

should be considered that students assimilate the institution that welcomes them as a microcosm of their later professional life. Therefore, it is not only important that the ethical attitudes of teachers prevail but also that the institution as a whole can be seen as an example of ethical action [22]. Prioritising institutional interests over personal or group interests should characterise educational management. The university thus becomes the means of higher education for the development of ethical citizens.

Academic planning, teacher training, ethical mainstreaming, and its practice by teachers and higher education institutions make it possible to return to the basis of the teaching-learning process: the student [25]. All these actions encourage students and graduates to handle themselves with academic honesty, recognise the intellectual property of others, and learn to value the importance of ethics in research [21]. A methodological renovation is necessary to allow students to take an active position in learning (discovery pedagogy), with flexibility, through a didactic that will enable dialogue between society and academia. This renewal would be the appropriate scenario to consolidate philosophical, ethical, and moral formation.

3. Conclusions

In this research, actions for implementing ethical practices in higher education have been proposed. Teacher training—planned by academic management that prioritises ethics in its educational model—will allow teachers to develop ethical attitudes and update knowledge with tools that facilitate the curricular inclusion of ethics. In conclusion, the effective implementation of ethics in higher education depends on mainstreaming it in the curricula and the creation of a figure for its permanent analysis, such as the Ethics Lecture or Chair. Likewise, this implementation in practice will occur thanks to ethical teaching and institutional actions. The ultimate goal is the formation of professionals and honest citizens ready to face the complex dilemmas of the present and future world. There is an intrinsic relationship between teachers, students, and the institution that hosts them. The links of ethics that develop within this relationship reflect a series of characteristics in the role and profile of each one of them, given that each educational activity is an ethical action. With this, we hope to contribute to the development of new research with case studies that put into practice the actions proposed and provide feedback for the continuous development of the subject.

In the last two decades at the international level, it is evident that the most crucial challenge is to maintain quality in education systems. Hence, the challenge is to train citizens to prepare for the dynamics of contemporary society and the era of information and uncertainty [13]. In addition, unrestricted respect for human dignity is the vertex within the particularities of an ethical teacher, through the action of his autonomy and academic freedom, as principles that govern the educational dynamics.

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