The Impacts of Ethics Education on Future Managers' Ethical Decisions

Nor Azizah Zainal Abidin[1]*
Zuriana Zahrin[1]
School of Government,
College of Law, Government and International Studies,
Universiti Utara Malaysia

*Corresponding author: norazizah@uum.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The rise of unethical behaviour like commercial crimes has become an issue and started gaining attention from the government, society and business. Education is seen by scholars as one of the best solutions because it has the ability to produce a holistic result. By educating young generations, who are our future leaders, it will help to awake the interests of people towards building an ethical society. The government of Malaysia started the process of building ethical society by directing all the public universities incorporating ethics education in their curriculum. Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) is also committed in realising this agenda. However, since the policy was implemented, there appears to be very minimal research that has explored the effects of ethics education on future managers' ethical behaviour including in making ethical decisions. Therefore, this paper aims to study the impact of ethics education on future managers' ethical decisions. A total of 300 students who were in the second-year and third-year studies from various academic programs have been chosen as respondents. From the survey, 78% (n=234) of respondents completed a course on ethics while 22% (n=66) of respondents will taking their ethics courses in the coming semester. This research revealed that the majority of students recognised the importance of ethics and they found that learning ethics was helpful in improving their ethical understanding and developing their personal ethical values. However, practicing ethical values, including making ethical decisions were challenging as students perceived they were living in unethical environment. The respondents indicated that they were surrounded by unethical people, and for this reason, some of them disclosed that they would rather silent than reveal about unethical actions.

***Keywords**: Ethics Experience, Students Perception, Ethics Education, Ethics Understanding*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, ethics has become a highly debated topic among governments, businesses, and societies around the globe due to the increasing number of ethical scandals involving professionals and executives. The collapse of big corporations such as Enron Corporation, WorldCom, Arthur Anderson, Global Crossing and others has underscored the importance of ethics in organisations (Davies, Moen & Dykstra, 2009). Malaysia is not exceptional in this case. The increasing trend in commercial crimes being committed in this country is worrying. Commercial crimes are also known as economic or business crimes involving several types of crimes such as criminal breach of trust, cheating and misappropriation of funds. For instance, in 2011, the number of commercial crime cases reported to the police was stood up to a total of 22,033 involving losses of up to RM1.1 billion. In 2012 and 2013, the number of cases went down to 18,386 and 16,661, but the total loss ballooned steadily to RM1.619 billion and RM1.775 billion respectively (Gillbert, 2013). The rise of unethical behaviour like commercial crimes has gained attention from governments because it could lead a country to a bad economic crisis (Sedmak & Nastav, 2010). Improving moral behaviour is challenging as it requires a holistic solution (Doost, 1999; Yin, Suhaiza & Fatima, 2014). In this case, education is seen by scholars as one of the best solutions because it has the ability to produce a holistic result (Kohlberg, 1981; Sakar, 2015). Educating young generations, who will be managers in the future, will help to awake the interests of people towards building an ethical society. The university is seen as one of the influential institutions which is able to helps students develop moral and ethical standard that may not have gotten elsewhere (Dellaportas, et.al, 2006). Hence, the paper aimed to explore how the university students who are our future managers perceive the influence of ethics education on their ethical decision within the scope of environment and professional identities. The paper proceeds by discussing the problem statement, and methodology used in this study. The findings and discussion are presented before providing the conclusion in the final section.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The government of Malaysia believes that ethics has a very important and effective role in developing the country. Therefore, ethics has been

inserted as one of the important courses in higher education system. The efforts started in 1990s, when the government directed local universities to incorporate ethics education in their curriculum (Mohd Zabidi & Kamarudin, 1996). The direction aligned with the Malaysian Vision 2020 that is to ensure the prevalence of high moral values. After 20 years later, the efforts are still continued under the implementation of the Malaysian soft skills, in which ethics has been identified as one of the important skills that should be enhanced among universities' students.

Nevertheless, to the researchers' knowledge, there appears to be very minimal research that has explored the effects of ethics education on students' ethical behaviour. UUM is committed in employing ethics education in both curriculum and co-curriculum. UUM offers nearly 40 academic programmes and ethics course has been inserted either as a core or elective course for almost all the academic programmes. However, since the introduction of ethics education in UUM, least is known about the effects of ethics education on the UUM students. Therefore, this study aimed to learn how the UUM students perceived the influence of ethics education on their ethical decisions.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 343 questionnaires were distributed among UUM students who were in the second-year and third-year studies from various academic programs. To ensure the participants involved in this study not only completed their ethics course but also represented various academic programs in UUM, two stages of sampling method namely stratified sampling and simple random sampling techniques were implemented. However, only 300 completed questionnaires were collected which represented a return rate of 87.46%. In order to assess respondents' ethical decisions Hypothetical Ethical Situations (HESs) questions were adopted as the instrument in this study. The instrument was developed based on previous work of Low (2009).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To study the impact of ethics education on future managers' ethical decisions, information related to respondents' ethics education was collected. Findings were discussed in the following sections.

Levels of Learning Ethics

This section discusses the levels of learning ethics among respondents. It is important to identify whether respondents were exposed to a formal ethics education before analysing their ability in making ethical decisions. Table 1 shows 78% of the respondents have completed a course in ethics while 22% of respondents have not completed a course in ethics yet. Respondents were also asked about the comprehensiveness of content of ethics courses in their programme structures. Majority of respondents (40.7% n=22), who have completed their ethics courses revealed that they learned ethics as a course, meaning that the whole content of ethics course is all related to ethics education. Meanwhile, the other group of respondents revealed that in some bachelor programmes, the content of ethics courses was not comprehensive as it covered only few subtopics in chapters (18.7%, n=56) and some of respondents found that ethics education was discussed only in a chapter (18.7%, n=56). The respondents were also required to indicate the status of ethics courses offered in their program. Table 1 shows that most of the bachelor programmes have offered ethics course as a programme core (39.3%, n=118) and followed by a university core (27%, n=81). The rest, 7% (n=21) and 4.7% (n=14) of respondents' revealed that they have learned ethics as an elective and minor respectively.

Table 1.

Ethics Education Backgrounds

		Have studied ethics education			
The content of ethics course is covered in		Yes		No	
		n	*%*	*n*	*%*
subtopics in chapter		56	18.7	-	-
a chapter in the course		56	18.7	-	-
a course		122	40.7	-	-
irrelevant		-	-	66	22.0
	Total	*234*	*78.0*	*66*	*22.0*
An ethics syllabus is offered as a		Yes		No	
		n	*%*	*n*	*%*
university core		81	27.0	-	-
programme core		118	39.3	-	-
minor		14	4.7	-	-
elective programme		21	7.0	-	-
irrelevan		-	-	66	22.0
	Total	*234*	*78.0*	*66*	*22.0*

(continued)

An ethics syllabus is offered during		Have studied ethics education			
		Yes		No	
		n	*%*	*n*	*%*
1st year		63	21.0	-	-
2nd year		52	17.3	-	-
3rd year		100	33.3	-	-
4th year		19	6.3	-	-
irrelevan		-	-	66	22.0
	Total	*234*	*78.0*	*66*	*22.0*

Based on the findings, this study also found that the majority 33.3% (n=100) of respondents have studied ethics during their third year study, and the rest of respondents, 21% (n=63) study ethics in first year, 17.3% (n=52) in second year. Only 6.3% (n=9) during the final (4th) year.

Respondents' Ethical Decision

This section studies on respondents' decisions on ethics using *Hypothetical Ethical Situations (HESs)* instrument which involving seven (7) ethical scenarios. Details of the findings are presented in Table 2. In particular, Table 2, HES 1 depicts whether or not respondent would cheat on their tutorial assignments by copying another student assignment. Copying other students' assignments was wrong and this action would not be a permissible activity. Therefore, students ought not to carry out this action. From the total, 50.7% of respondents refused to do so. Unfortunately, 49.3% (148) of respondents prepared to act unethically and surprisingly the answers are the highest scores of students who have studied ethics 39.3% (n=118). HES 1 results show the scores for ethical and unethical behaviours are almost balance indicating the cheating culture exists in the university and students having difficulties to identify whether copying other people works is ethical or not.

HES 2 aimed to access students' attitudes towards cheating. The question was asking the respondents' willingness to report cheating to lecturers. From the question, it views egoism of people in their natural state, selfish and motivated by self-preservation and self-gain. Table 2 shows a significant 83.0% (n=249) of respondents' refused to report and they chose to silence about the act. Both category, have learnt (62.7%, n=188) and have not learn ethics (20.7%, n=62) show the similar pattern of the decision. Only 17% (51) of respondent would report about the copying activities.

In the HES 3, respondents were again asked about copying/cheating issue, but in this situation the issue of copying/cheating involved an implication on students' grade. Respondents were informed that they will get a higher grade by modifying other student's works. The question aimed to evaluate whether students are willing to involve with cheating/copying if there would be an implication on their grades. Surprisingly, HES 3 in Table 2 shows that 55.7% (n=167) of respondents (involving 45.4% respondents who have studied ethics and 10.3% have not taken the ethics education yet) were prepared to modify other people works if they would be given a better grade. Meanwhile, 44.3% (133) refused to do so. This might suggest that respondents might feel that it was acceptable to modify other people works because as it will improve their grades. This finding contrasted with the findings of Low (2009). Low investigated the perceptions of accounting students and graduates in New Zealand on the importance of ethical education interventions in accountability education. Low specifically looked at the legitimation of students ethical decisions through the interpretation of their ethical responses to ethical situations and hypothetical case situations. The work of Low found that the accounting students and graduates in New Zealand might feel that it was acceptable to copy or modify other people works if there were less complicated consequences where grades might not be implicated. The participants showed that they were unwilling to copy or modify if that assignment had implication on their grades

In the HES 4, respondents were required to identify whether ethical or not if they signed a class attendance on behalf of their friends who had other important tasks to be completed during the class time. Table 2 shows that only 32.2% (97) of respondents indicated their willingness to sign a class attendance on behalf of their friends. From the record, respondents' have learnt 24.3%, n=73) and have not learn ethics 8%, n=24) show the similar pattern of the decision. Meanwhile, the majority of 67.7% (n=203) of respondents revealed that they will not do so. In the view of researchers, respondents seemed to disclose that they knew the basic of ethical principles but in practice, some people just choose not to apply their ethical knowledge may be due to certain constrains. For instance, one may help his or her busy friend, who actively involves with university's activities, by signing a class attendance for him or her, with the intention to help the friend from facing bigger problem such as being barred from the final exam.

The next situation is a challenge about the decision of respondents regarding their future work. HES 5 is a question about personal values and behaviour

whether or not they would lie about their abilities in their curriculum vitae (CV). HES 5 in Table 2 shows that the majority 88.7% (n=266) (involving 70.3% (n=211) respondents who have studied ethics and 18.3% (n=55) of respondents have not taken the ethics education yet) were prepared to do the 'right act' compared to a lower percentage 11.3% (n=34) of respondent desperate to claim the untruth CV. HES 6 question looked at whether or not respondents would be prepared to distort the truth in attempting to get a better salary offer from an employer. This situation might explain how prepared individuals are to lie to gain more money in their lives. Based on Table 2, the findings are more favourable for "No" responses than "Yes" in that a higher 75.7% (n=227) of respondents (involving 61.7%, n=185 have studied ethics whilst 14%, n=42 respondents have not taken the ethics education yet) were not prepared to lie about a rival firm offer, compared to the 24.3% (n=73) of respondents who were prepared to lie about such an offer. If someone was already prepared to lie to get a better salary offer from an employer, then one can only speculate as to the extent to which that individual would be prepared to become involved in unethical behaviour for self-gain.

The HES 7 question was designed to ask whether the respondents would become involved in unethical creative financial practices and subsequently it was important that such a direct question was asked. The seventh situation asked if respondents would creatively manipulate financial information for 'self-interest' reasons, that is, manipulate financial information to allow for future personal gain through bonus payments for favourable future results. From HES 7 in Table 2, the decision "No" showed 87% (n=261) as the highest score, which is involving 70.7%, n=212 of respondents who have studied ethics and 16.3%, n=49 respondents have not taken the ethics education yet. Those are would not manipulate the results by creative write-downs to facilitate future performance. Contrary with 13% (n=39) of respondents who preferred to act inappropriately.

Table 2.

Respondents' Decision on Hypothetical Ethical Situation

HES 1	Have studied ethics education				Total	
Respondent are unable to complete a tutorial assignment but you have been offered a copy answer of other students from different tutorial groups. Would you accept the offer?	Yes		No			
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Yes	118	39.3	30	10.0	*148*	49.3
No	116	38.7	36	12.0	*152*	50.7
Total	*234*	78.0	*66*	22.0	*300*	100.0

HES 2	Have studied ethics education				Total	
You find there are other peers have a copy of the assignment in their circles. Would you choose to silently?	Yes		No			
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Yes	188	62.7	62	20.7	*250*	*83.3*
No	46	15.3	4	1.3	*50*	*16.7*
Total	*234*	*78.0*	*66*	*22.0*	*300*	*100.0*

HES 3	Have studied ethics education				Total	
A friend suggested you to modify other students' assignments to get higher marks. Would you accept the offer?	Yes		No			
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Yes	136	45.3	31	10.3	167	*55.7*
No	98	32.7	35	11.7	133	*44.3*
Total	*234*	*78.0*	*66*	*22.0*	*300*	*100.0*

HES 4	Have studied ethics education				Total	
You have been asked by your best friend to sign the class attendance on behalf of him or her because he or she was busy with extra-curricular activities. Would you fulfilling the request?	Yes		No			
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Yes	73	24.3	24	8.0	97	*32.3*
No	161	53.7	42	14.0	203	*67.7*
Total	*234*	*78.0*	*66*	*22.0*	*300*	*100.0*

HES 5

You are applying for a job and consider that your communication skills are not promoted well in your C.V. By claiming to have been a member of the school debating team this aspect would look better. Would you do this?	Have studied ethics education				*Total*	
	Yes		No			
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Yes	23	7.7	11	3.7	34	*11.3*
No	211	70.3	55	18.3	266	*88.7*
Total	*234*	*78.0*	*66*	*22.0*	*300*	*100.0*

HES 6

You receive a slightly disappointing salary offer from an accounting firm, but you have heard that they are negotiable. By claiming a better offer from a rival firm you may be able to induce an increase in the offer. Would you do this?	Have studied ethics education				*Total*	
	Yes		No			
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Yes	49	16.3	24	8.0	73	*24.3*
No	185	61.7	42	14.0	227	*75.7*
Total	*234*	*78.0*	*66*	*22.0*	*300*	*100.0*

HES 7

You have been appointed as Manager at Government-linked companies (GLCs) with high salary deals. The appointment gives you the power to manage the interests of the company. You realise that the authority also gives you the space to manipulate the company's financial information. Would you do this?	Have studied ethics education				*Total*	
	Yes		No			
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Yes	22	7.3	17	5.7	39	*13.0*
No	212	70.7	49	16.3	261	*87.0*
Total	*234*	*78.0*	*66*	*22.0*	*300*	*100.0*

Based on the seven HESs indicators discussed earlier, it is the researchers' perceptions that respondents had a moderate understanding of what is being ethical and unethical. However, in certain circumstances, they were facing difficulties in deciding an action whether it is ethical or not because the environment perceived some unethical actions as part of the society culture. For this reason, some respondents felt that an ethical decision unable to be

performed and they perceived that they lived within unethical environment. Therefore, it is researchers' conclusion that ethical decisions were influenced by individual ethical principles and environmental influences.

The Impact of Ethics Education

This study also identifies the effects of learning ethics on respondents' personal ethical development. The results indicated that majority of respondents agreed that the content of their ethics courses was helpful in developing their personal ethics i.e. 73.6%, n=221 (agree and strongly agree).
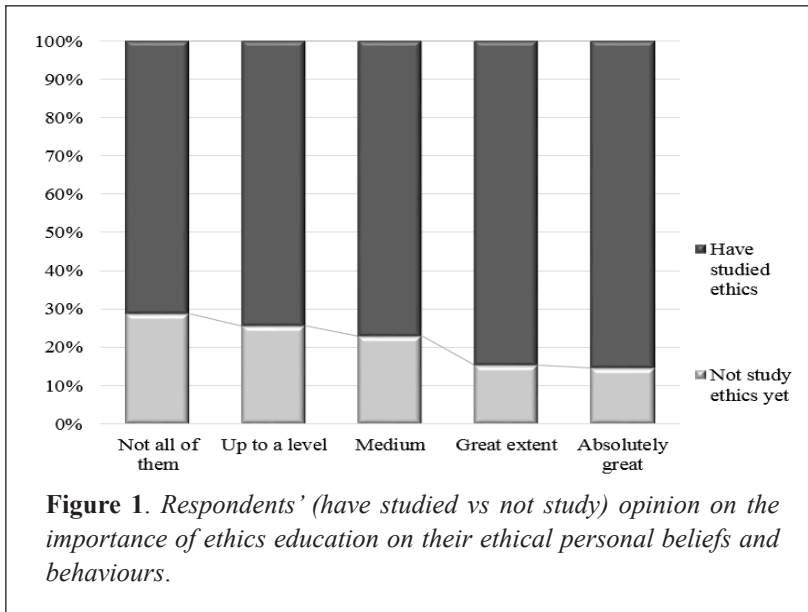
Table 3.

The content of ethics syllabus is very effective to develop personal ethics

		Have studied ethics education			
The content is very effective to develop personal ethics		Yes			
		n	*%*	*n*	*%*
Strongly disagree		6	2.0	-	-
Disagree		7	2.3	-	-
Agree		172	57.3	-	-
Strongly agree		49	16.3	-	-
Irrelevant		-	-	66	22.0
	Total	*234*	*78.0*	*66*	*22.0*

This study also asked the respondents' opinion on the importance of ethics education on their ethical personal beliefs and behaviours. Figure 1 depicts that the respondents who have studied ethics have a great influence to their beliefs and personal behaviours as the score show from slightly *'not influence all of them'* to high *'absolutely great'* influence. In contrary, respondents who have not taken any ethics education were unable to perceive the best benefit of ethical education by scoring 'not influence all of them' as the best answer.

It is true to say that ethics is one of the knowledge that can be learned. From the figure, it can be deemed that ethics education is significant to develop student's ethical values. As 20s and 30s young adults, the basic problem-solving strategies they use to deal with were associated with the number of years of formal ethical education (Velasquez, Andre, Shanks & Meyer, 1987).

Figure 1. *Respondents' (have studied vs not study) opinion on the importance of ethics education on their ethical personal beliefs and behaviours*.

CONCLUSION

Based on discussions and findings presented, this study draws the following conclusion. First, every individual has a set of values through which he/she looks at all things and also at the world. Values, however, are not permanent and they will change through the socialisation process undergone by individuals. Since individuals experienced different socialisation processes, each individual has different values.   This explains the result of HES questions on why individual had different thoughts on what was considered as being ethical and unethical. Second, ethics are sets of rules that govern the behaviour of a person, established by a group or culture. Values lay the foundation of ethics and change from time to time according to the changes in the environment. In the context of UUM students, UUM ethical environment was created by rules and regulations established by the university. Ethical awareness was spread out when students first registered with the university. Ethical understanding was developed through a combination of formal (curriculum) and informal education (co-curriculum). The research found that the respondents hold certain values, but they do believe in ethics and moral. In fact, the respondents appreciated ethics education that they received during the studies and they admitted that all the ethical values they learned during ethics lessons were useful for them. Indeed, respondents indicated

that the ethics lessons helped them to develop their ethical understanding including building their professional values.

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