

ETHICS EDUCATION IN THE AUSTRALIAN ACCOUNTING CURRICULUM: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY EXAMINING BARRIERS AND ENABLERS - A REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

In the accounting profession, there can be a number of ethical issues that surround the future of the profession. These ethical issues are concerned with the moral act of an individual or the way in which one behaves. The article 'Ethics Education in the Australian Accounting Curriculum: A Longitudinal Study Examining the Barriers and Enablers', seeks to provide readers with the increased knowledge of why it is significant to incorporate ethics in the Australian Accounting Curriculum. These ethical issues have been a major source of concern resulting in losses of personal savings and commercial investments. According to the authors, a number of inquiries (e.g. the Fitzgerald Commission and HIH Royal Commission in Australia) were established to investigate the causes attributed to these transgressions, and identify possible preventative measures to avoid future scandals. These investigations acknowledged the complex ethical issues faced in the accounting profession and the difficulty in addressing them; in particular, independence-related issues and conflicts of interest in client relationships in which economic benefits were substantial. The issue of ethics education has become more of an issue in accounting following the "high profile corporate collapses

during the 1980s and again in the early 2000s that resulted in huge losses of personal savings and commercial investments, mostly without explanation or compensation" [3 (p.362)]. Hence, in keeping with the requirements of this course, this article provides a critical review of the titled article.

SUMMARY

A discourse of ethics is encapsulated in an article entitled 'Ethics Education in the Australian Accounting Curriculum: A Longitudinal Study Examining Barriers and Enablers'. It is a quantitative research conducted by Dellaportas and colleagues [3]. The researchers forwarded a rationale for the choiced study supported by a comprehensive literature review, the use of survey research design, findings and a comparative discussion of literature and the current findings. The sampling design is a purposive one of 39 Head of Schools and Department of Accounting in Australian universities. The study is centered on two objectives: first an investigation into the nature of ethics education intervention in the Australian undergraduate accounting curriculum and how this has changed in 12 years (i.e. between 2000 and 2012), and secondly, an analysis of the barriers, if any, that

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constrain the implementation of ethics education in accounting degree programs, by soliciting the opinions of Heads of Departments or schools in Australian universities.

The literature on ethics education began from an implied basis that ethics is a legitimate pursuit and should be taught. This study examines the extent to which ethics is taught in the Australian accounting curriculum and the potential reasons that prohibit further ethics intervention. Particularly, two issues were raised in this study: first, how ethics is incorporated in the accounting curriculum, and second the barriers that prevent further intervention. Movement to incorporate ethics into the curriculum was evident from the data collected in the initial survey, acknowledging the importance of ethics education. However, from the evidence obtained in the subsequent survey, there has been little change to ethics education; in fact, the evidence indicates a decline in the extent of ethics education represented by fewer dedicated courses. Given the increased interest in accounting ethics stemming from a variety of sources that include professional accounting associations, specialist journals, conferences, and public pressure, one would expect to see changes in the curricula. In fact, it would not have been unreasonable to expect an achieved level of legitimacy commensurate with traditional areas of research. If research opportunities in ethics are limited, so, too, are rewards and incentives. This may explain, in part, why the respondents perceive a lack of qualified staff trained to teach ethics.

Overall, the supply of qualified and adequately motivated staff, combined with the opportunity costs associated with destabilizing the traditional accounting curriculum, have merged to limit the enhancement of accounting ethics education. The data reported in Table 1 (see Appendix) support opportunities for the inclusion of ethics education in the accounting

curriculum but are hamstrung by resource constraints that include a lack of qualified staff [3 (p.376)]. There appears to be little dispute about the importance of ethics, but strong leadership, sufficient resources, and incentives are required to establish a clear focus and commitment to ethics education in accounting. Greater ethics interventions will be achieved when Heads promote an attitude among staff to understand the importance of ethics education and develop a commitment and positive outlook towards its provisioning. Heads may either recruit staff with an interest in ethics or establish a policy to expand the competency of existing staff. They must then be prepared to support the professional development of these staff members which may include training and creation of resources such as case materials. In cases where ethics education is resisted by staff, the Head must be adequately convinced of its necessity and be willing to take a stand to engender a commitment to teaching ethics.

ANALYSIS OF STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Overall, the article is a good one with clear weaknesses because of methodological limitations. The researchers knew exactly what they were getting into throughout the process and stayed on target. The information presented is logical and sequential and follows as they targeted their intended audience. We find the gathered information useful at various educational levels. There is a need to integrate ethics education in the curriculum. The evidences of usage favorably supported their research and accordingly were properly cited. For example: The lack of depth of ethics education in the accounting curriculum has also been linked to the inadequacy of learning resources [1]. Thomas supported that statement by saying that there are a few textbooks dealing exclusively with the topic of

accounting ethics[9]. Another strength of the researchers is that they used articles on the same topic from other countries along with the survey research design. Some critical weaknesses of this study are the non-probability sampling technique that was used, the small sample size, non-inclusion of regulatory bodies and the non-generalizability of the findings. Such weaknesses are fundamental to the validity of a study and the researchers failed to mention whether these may or may not have affected the conclusions. Nevertheless, the use of standardized instrument aid in the collection of data provided pertinent information on the topic which enhanced the quality of the data collection.

APPLICATION TO PRACTICE

Ethics education is an important aspect of a child's development. However, the integration of ethics education in the curriculum is not just a practice that should be at the university level in order to correct a problem that may be a part of one's early socialization. The reality that emerged from Dellaportas et al.'s work showed how unethical practices have far reaching effect on the wider society. There are plethoras of evidence that emerged including the empirical one of this article that showed the unethical practices of business executives in organizations and the constricted role of ethical courses. The researchers showed the behavior of some executives, especially in accounting practices, and how unfettered powers can corrupt these people. Hence, they argued that ethical courses at the university level are needed to fashion and improve the behaviors of accounting executives. The unethical practices of some executives are indeed of social concerns and rightfully so, must be regulated. But, simply holding heads of departments at universities to the teaching of ethics will not address the situation because

the problem is deeper than the recommendation: early socialization and a regulatory framework in the accountancy profession to include punishment.

The integration of ethics education cannot commence at the university level, without paying attention to earlier socialization and a regulatory framework. The teaching of ethics cannot be void of understanding human behavior, the psychology of human behavior and role of punishment in curbing social deviance. The reality is, merely teaching ethics education is insufficient in curbing behaviors and insufficient for implementation in a profession, without clear penalties for breaches. The researchers did not clearly show how ethics education at the university level will translate into better practices, within the context of low emphasis in the regulatory accountancy framework on the matter.

Ethics education must commence from the primary school level, with clear regulatory framework on punishment when breaches occur. For example, ethics is integrated in the Grade One curriculum where students are exposed to the use of polite words. The integration of ethics in the curriculum will allow educators to teach more about the concept ethics. For example, teachers at JJ High School assist the students to form the concept of what is wrong and what is right. It is not sufficient to educate the students on ethical issues that will equip them for the future; additional training is also needed for teachers in their delivery of such matters. Cohen and Pant [2]; Langenderfer and Rockness [6]; McQuillen [7]; Owens [8] all argued that the lack of appropriately qualified or experienced staff has been cited as a major barrier to teaching ethics. In addition, Owens [8] states that a lack of appropriate experience or training may cause staff to avoid ethics in their specialized accounting courses or to deal

with the topic superficially, primarily because staff may not know how to bring the discussion to a rational conclusion beyond the expression of personal views (see also, Hosmer [5]). Take for example, the accounting department at a well known high school in Kingston, Jamaica where they included the teaching of ethics in accounting as a core component of their Business of Accounts class. This undoubtedly will provide students with the necessary knowledge to be able to make ethical decisions that are right without causing any dilemmas.

GENERAL COMMENTS

The article provided a premise for the justification of ethics education in accounting programs at the university level. Although the researchers gave a comprehensive review of pertinent literature on ethics education, provided empirical research findings, and argued for the importance of ethics education, the limitations of the work retards the general validity of the work. However, the research was an insight into the matter that warrants further investigation and the article sets a good platform for further enquiry on the matter.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Perceptions affecting the Inclusion of Ethics Education

Statement	2000		2012		P value
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	
1 There is a lack of qualified or specifically trained ethics educators within the school/department of accounting	3.50	1	3.24	1	0.919
2 Ethics is not incorporated because of an overcrowded curriculum that results in more traditional and accepted areas of accounting being omitted from the programme	3.63	2	3.82	3	0.676
3 Teachers indoctrinate or impose their value system on the intended learner	4.29	3	5.53	7	0.282
4 Moral standards of students are fully developed and cannot be changed or improved with ethics in accounting education	4.61	4	4.29	4	0.419
5 Accounting educators are reluctant to be involved in ethics education due to a lack of opportunities and incentives for the pursuit of teaching, research, and publication in accounting ethics	4.78	5	3.65	2	0.019*
6 There is a lack of reference material (books and cases) specific to accounting and ethics	5.08	6	4.81	5	0.274
7 The incorporation of ethics in accounting education is included for the sake of appearances only, and is merely a response to critics of business education resulting from corporate scandals	5.33	7	5.35	6	0.203
8 Ethics education is subjective and ethical dilemmas lack definitive solutions, which prohibits effective learning	5.50	8	5.82	8	0.993
9 Ethics is a 'soft', or unscientific subject and has no place in the accounting curriculum	6.25	9	6.47	9	0.070
10 Ethical problem-solving skills are not relevant or cannot be applied to the world of business	6.38	10	6.47	9	0.174

*Significant at 0.05.