

Research Article**EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF HIGHER EDUCATION ON ETHICAL VALUES AND PROFESSIONAL INTEGRITY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY****^{1,*} Shazia Shahzadi, ² Juhary Ali, ³ Tausif Ahmad Rajpoot and ⁴ Asher Ahmad Mashhood**¹Executive Director, AP, Holistic Medicine & Positive Energy Psychology Islamabad, Pakistan²Deputy Vice Chancellor, Professor, Asia e university Selangor, Malaysia³Professor, Dean, Faculty of Pharmaceutical & Allied Health Science, STMU, Islamabad, Pakistan⁴Professor, Dermatology & Aesthetic, Riphah Medical University, Islamabad, Pakistan**Received 15th August 2024; Accepted 17th September 2024; Published online 23rd October 2024**

Abstract

This article explored university students' perceptions regarding the university's role in fostering an ethical culture. The study adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach, utilizing a semi-structured interview tool developed from a literature review. Interviews were conducted with 15 students from various administrative-related disciplines. Findings indicated that students believe the university plays a significant role in promoting ethical culture and suggested several strategies to enhance this effort. The study concludes that universities, particularly those offering administrative degree programs, should extend their focus beyond merely developing technical and hard skills. Instead, they should embrace their essential role in encouraging reflection on social issues and instilling a sense of responsibility among future business leaders to create value in society.

Keywords: Ethical culture, University role, Student perceptions, Ethics, business.

INTRODUCTION

Human development involves both personal and professional growth, encompassing formal and informal aspects. Therefore, understanding the role of formal education and the responsibilities of higher education institutions in fostering the holistic development of citizens through ethical reflection is crucial. Ethics, broadly defined, pertains to customs, character, virtuous living, and social harmony. As a branch of philosophy, ethics examines the nature of good and serves as the foundation for actions stemming from human will that affect both personal and communal well-being. Cortina emphasizes that the primary task of ethics is to guide human actions, stating, "The ethical task consists...in accepting the moral world in its specificity and giving a reflexive reason for it, so that people may grow in knowledge about themselves and, thus, in freedom...it has that enlightening power proper to philosophy that is irreplaceable on the road to freedom" (Cortina, 2000). In the country where this study was conducted, corruption levels are significantly high. According to Transparency International, Ecuador ranks 105th out of 180 countries in perceived corruption, with a score of 36 out of 100. The report stresses the necessity of a systemic approach to combat corruption, stating that "while the fight against corruption stagnates and deteriorates, human rights and democracy are under attack" (Transparency International, 2022). Koris critique the prevalent focus of business schools on business-oriented approaches, neglecting the broader societal responsibilities of future professionals to contribute to the common good (Koris *et al.*, 2017). Employees in these institutions should cultivate ethical knowledge, behaviors, and skills to help their organizations thrive in competitive markets (Elrayah, 2021).

Reflecting this, American universities have established specialized centers dedicated to teaching business ethics, aiming to prepare students for moral decision-making rather than solely profit maximization, highlighting the critical role businesses play in addressing social issues (Surdam, 2020). Shah contend that despite repeated appeals for incorporating ethical reflection into business education, the emphasis on responsible business has been overshadowed by priorities like employability and profit maximization (Shah *et al.*, 2022). As a result, curricula often focus on developing technical skills while minimizing subjects that contribute to a well-rounded education. There is a pressing need for educational managers and instructors to focus on fostering these other essential skills, particularly in business programs, where reflecting on ethical considerations remains vital. The concept of ethical culture, defined as the approach to conducting business with integrity and honesty, is critical to this discussion. Ethical culture can be seen as a collection of disparate systems that must align to promote values like honor and integrity (Eury & Trevino, 2019). According to Pitt-Rivers (1999), honor functions as both a personal sentiment and an objective social norm that discourages inappropriate actions, while Cortina (2003) defines integrity as the consistency between one's actions and the values one claims to uphold, provided those values are universally acceptable. According to Ohreen study, maintaining a culture of honor and integrity is particularly challenging in higher education settings, where communities are continually evolving due to changes in student populations and leadership. Nevertheless, universities have the potential to promote ethical culture through their educational activities (Ohreen *et al.*, 2022). Kreismann and Talaulicarunderscores the effectiveness of ethics education, particularly when using interactive and participatory methods such as discussing ethical dilemmas and case studies (Kreismann & Talaulicar, 2021). Peer discussions can enhance moral reasoning by exposing students to diverse perspectives, allowing decisions

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to be reconsidered or reinforced through debate a process that benefits even more reserved students (Kreismann & Talaulicar, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study was to explore the perceptions of students from a regional universities regarding their institution's role in fostering an ethical culture. To achieve this, a qualitative exploratory study was conducted involving 15 students, both male and female, aged between 20 and 25, from various courses. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were developed based on an initial literature review. In the initial phase, a comprehensive literature review was undertaken to examine the concepts of ethical culture and the role of higher education institutions, particularly within programs. The findings from this review informed the development of a data collection tool, which was structured around several key categories: the prevalence of unethical behavior in a global context, the consequences of unethical actions at both individual and community levels, the role of universities in promoting ethical culture, and the impact of academic experiences on students' ethical behavior. These categories were further divided into subcategories, as detailed in Table 1.

to motivate ethical conduct; meanwhile, Rawls (1995) posits that a well-ordered society is organized to promote both the welfare of its members and the regulation of a public conception of justice. Thus, it is vital to recognize that the criteria of justice and the common good should go beyond individualistic biases. Concerning the impact of the lack of ethics at both the individual and community levels, all participants mentioned some kind of negative effect. For instance, they observed that unethical behaviors have become normalized in professional environments. Moreover, 34% cited the impact of poor political decisions on the country's development. This finding supports Kliksberg's (2013) argument about the detrimental effects of unethical behavior in organizations and public management, highlighting real cases that show the relationship between corruption and the deterioration of living conditions for society at large. The participants suggested that the situation could improve through changes at the individual level, reaffirming ethics as a reflection and analysis of what is considered good and valuable within a society, with a focus on individual well-being and the common good. Cortina and Martinez (2001) suggest that "the ethics of justice or ethics of minimums" only deal with the universal aspects of the moral phenomenon, such as duties of justice that are applicable to any rational being and constitute minimum requirements (Cortina & Martinez, 2001).

Table 1. Main categories and subcategories explored to examine the perceptions of students regarding the role of their university in enhancing their ethical culture

Category	Subcategory
Lack of ethics in the global context	Perception of the lack of ethics in the country.
Impact of misconduct at the individual and community levels	Effects of misconduct at the individual and community levels.
The role of the university in strengthening ethical culture	University as a means of fostering ethical culture.
Academic experiences that impact students' ethical behavior	Pedagogical experiences that have positively impacted students' ethical behavior. Pedagogical experiences that have negatively impacted students' ethical behavior. Academic experiences that could contribute to strengthening ethical culture at the university.
Ethics and academic curriculum	Subjects and content within the curriculum that enhance ethical understanding.
Ethics and business relationship	Ethical practices in business settings.

The interviews were conducted both face-to-face and virtually. For face-to-face interviews, voice notes were used, while virtual interviews were recorded during the sessions. After conducting the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed using Sonix software to systematize the data. The researchers then performed a narrative content analysis to identify recurring patterns in the participants' responses and to organize the findings accordingly.

RESULTS

The first interview question aimed to explore the participants' perceptions of the lack of ethics within a national context. The findings revealed that all participants felt a significant degree of ethical deprivation, with eight out of the 15, 54% interviewees specifically associating this issue with the term "corruption." Additionally, 32% of participants mentioned terms related to political power, such as "leaders," "government," and "state." Furthermore, 28% of participants linked a lack of education directly to ethical deficiencies. 3 of the 15 respondents, 20%, identified the lack of ethics as a major issue in the country, manifesting across various sectors, including academic and professional fields. 40% believed that the matter was tied to individual behavior, which is shaped by subjectivity and the tendency to relativize ethics, thereby complicating its analysis. This aligns with Cortina's perspective (2000) that moral diversity necessitates reflection

The participants' responses, such as "It is not something that is very important for people, myself included," and "I grew up thinking that certain situations were ethical, but in reality, they were not," reflect a dynamic and systemic view of ethics rather than a static one. Corruption was identified as a familiar issue to the extent that some behaviors might be deemed negligent, associated with extreme individualism and laissez-faire thinking. Bridging the gap between "want" and "duty" fosters communal well-being, as one participant emphasized that doing what's right isn't always aligned with personal desires. Another area explored was the role of universities in promoting an ethical culture, with the premise that ethical training begins within the family. One participant felt that it is challenging to change behaviors at the university level due to the maturity of students upon entry; they suggested that ethical reflection should start in school or college and be reinforced in the workplace. Meanwhile, 86% of participants believed that universities could strengthen ethical practices through both academic experiences (related to coursework) and relational experiences (student-teacher interactions). This perception aligns with Kohlberg's moral development theory, which, building on Piaget's theory of evolutionary development, suggests that moral conscience develops alongside human evolution, with the post-conventional stage being the peak of moral conscience, where social norms are recognized as beneficial for good living (Kohlberg, as cited in Piaget).

Table 2. Participants' Perceptions of Ethical Deprivation and the Role of Universities in Promoting Ethical Practices

Interview Question/Theme	Percentage (%)
Participants associating ethical deprivation with "corruption"	54% (8/15)
Participants mentioning political power terms (leaders, government, state)	32%
Participants linking lack of education to ethical deficiencies	28%
Participants identifying lack of ethics as a major issue across sectors	20% (3/15)
Participants linking ethical issues to individual behavior and subjectivity	40%
Participants citing the impact of poor political decisions on national development	34%
Participants believing universities can strengthen ethical practices	86%
Students reporting no pedagogical experiences in ethical reflection	26%
Students noting teachers fostering ethical experiences through lectures or case analyses	48%
Students believing ethical training should be integrated across all subjects	94%

Table 3. Participants' Perceptions and Experiences of Ethics in Higher Education and the National Context: A Concise Overview of Interview Findings

Theme	Details/Findings	Percentage
Perception of Lack of Ethics	High level of ethical deprivation; associated with corruption. Political power and lack of education identified as contributing factors.	100% felt lack of ethics; 33% mentioned political power; 27% mentioned lack of education.
Impact of Lack of Ethics	Affectation at both individual and community levels; ethical violations normalized in the professional sphere; wrong political decisions impacting national development.	100% mentioned some kind of impact; 33% cited impact on development.
Improving Ethics	Emphasis on the need for individual behavior change; ethics viewed as reflection on what is considered good and valuable, requiring minimum standards for human dignity.	Not specified.
Perception of Corruption	Corruption normalized, leading to extreme individualism; need to balance 'want' and 'duty' for community well-being.	Not specified.
Role of University in Strengthening Ethics	Universities perceived as crucial in fostering ethical practices through academic and relational experiences; linked to moral development theories.	87% believe universities strengthen ethics; 47% had positive experiences related to ethics in education.
Positive Pedagogical Experiences	Ethics learned more effectively through practical experiences, case studies, and direct teacher-student interactions than formal lectures.	47% had positive experiences; 27% had no such experiences.
Negative Pedagogical Experiences	Virtual classes seen as promoting dishonesty; unequal treatment and tolerance of dishonesty by teachers were criticized.	Mentioned by two students.
Importance of Linking Theory with Reality	Suggestion for more active learning practices, critical thinking development, and discussions on ethical dilemmas within subjects.	100% agree.
Curricular Emphasis on Ethics	Need for ethics education to be integrated across all subjects throughout university education; specific subjects identified to strengthen ethical understanding.	93% support cross-cutting approach.
Dialogic Ethics	Ethics should involve dialogue, facing conflicts with commitment, and be contextualized beyond regulation.	Not specified.

Table 4. Findings on Ethical Perceptions and Experiences in Higher Education and the Global Context

Category	Subcategory	Findings
Lack of Ethics in the Global Context	Perception of Lack of Ethics in the Country	Perceived as subjective and complex; evident in both professional and academic settings.
Impact of Misconduct at the Individual and Community Level	Affecting Misconduct at the Individual and Community Level	Ethical misconduct has become normalized; business practices are disconnected from ethics; corruption linked to power dynamics and laissez-faire attitudes.
The Role of the University in Strengthening Ethical Culture	University as an Instance of Strengthening Ethical Culture	Universities play a crucial role through academic experiences and teacher examples; emphasis on applying ethical rules, promoting curiosity, and fostering critical thinking.
Academic Experiences Impacting Students' Ethical Behavior	Pedagogical Experiences with Positive Impact Pedagogical Experiences with Negative Impact	No clear link to positive ethical behavior beyond the use of anti-plagiarism software. Online education linked to increased copying and academic dishonesty.
Ethics and Academic Curriculum	Academic Experiences Contributing to Ethical Culture Subjects and Contents Strengthening Ethical Approach	Importance of linking theory with practice, providing experiential learning, maintaining rigorous standards, and integrating ethics across all subjects. Ethical considerations are discussed generally, but specific ethical subjects are not clearly identified.
Ethics and Business Relationship	Ethical Business	Acknowledged separation between ethics and business practices, highlighting an ongoing challenge.

Regarding pedagogical experiences related to ethical reflection, 26% of students reported that they had not encountered such experiences in their academic life, noting that teaching often focuses on technical aspects and hard skills. However, 48% noted that certain teachers fostered these experiences, for example, through personalized lectures or ethical case analyses in textbooks. Some students mentioned negative experiences, such as virtual assessments that facilitate dishonesty, or unequal treatment by lecturers, while others had no negative experiences. These findings are consistent with Vallaeys (2014) view that universities have a responsibility to

cultivate future societal leaders, which requires a holistic approach to reflect on and address societal problems. Thus, universities must promote ethical principles, equitable development, and sustainability through their curricula and institutional practices. Students also stressed the importance of integrating ethics into decision-making processes in research, thesis development, and other projects, where they could apply their knowledge practically. Ford and Richardson (1994) noted that ethical decision-making is an individual process, while Porter and Cordoba (2009) argued that decision-making from a social responsibility perspective occurs at the organizational

level. When asked about academic experiences that could help foster an ethical culture among students, all interviewees emphasized the importance of connecting theory with reality through active learning methods such as career-specific talks, debates, and professional testimonies, as well as activities that develop critical thinking like case studies and workshops. In informal education, students highlighted the role of teachers in promoting ethical behaviors by being more stringent against plagiarism, fostering teamwork, ensuring equal treatment, and setting an example. At the curricular level, participants identified subjects such as accounting, entrepreneurship, legislation, administration, computer security, and networking as areas that address ethics. Additionally, 94% believed that ethical training should be integrated across all subjects throughout university education. Finally, all students believed that ethical business practices are possible. These insights align with Kliksberg's (2003) assertion about the fundamental role of universities in addressing ethics, highlighting the need to go beyond implementing a single ethics course to embedding ethical discussions and dilemmas across all subjects. This urgency to revitalize ethics within universities suggests that ethical dialogue should be promoted in a way that is contextually relevant, inspiring professional practice rooted in ethical principles (Eurasquin, 2014).

Conclusion

This research highlights that students believe universities have a crucial role in cultivating an ethical culture among future professionals, particularly within administrative fields. Participants noted that corruption in both public and private sectors is intrinsically linked to a deficiency in ethics, which undermines the common good and has, unfortunately, become normalized. To address this issue, students suggested that universities should embed the examination and reflection of ethical issues throughout their curricula. They emphasized the need for integrating ethical dilemmas related to their fields of study into the educational process. This approach should include experiential learning that mirrors real-world scenarios faced by professionals, helping students to grapple with the complexities of ethical decision-making in practical contexts. The findings reveal a pressing challenge for universities that prioritize the development of technical skills at the expense of ethical education. The study underscores the importance of balancing technical training with ethical instruction. Such a balance is essential not only for professional competency but also for the holistic development of individuals as responsible members of society. Both the theoretical framework and participant feedback indicate that universities, especially those offering programs in administrative disciplines, must recognize their responsibility to cultivate leaders who are equipped to tackle both economic and social challenges. Training programs should not only prepare students to address market-related issues but also foster a deep understanding of ethical principles. This dual focus will enable graduates to contribute meaningfully to their professions and society by proposing solutions that are both innovative and ethically sound. Ultimately, integrating ethical considerations into the core of educational programs will enhance the overall effectiveness of professional training. It ensures that future leaders are well-rounded, capable of navigating complex moral landscapes, and committed to promoting the common good. By adopting these recommendations, universities can better fulfill their role in shaping professionals who are not only skilled but also

ethically guided, thus addressing the broader societal impacts of their work

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