

Ensuring Ethical Leadership In Society By University Graduates



A day doesn't pass that our airwaves are not flooded with accounts of corporate transgressions in private and public organisations. The Zondo Commission, set up to probe state capture, has revealed the vast number of individuals who have been party to unethical practices and the variety of organisations in which corporate governance practices have been boldly flouted. Many of these organisations are led, not by ignorant people, but by managers and executives who have walked the hallowed halls of academia and emerged with degrees and diplomas.

The mandate of the academy is to produce graduates who are thought leaders in society and ones who can promote societal transformation in all its facets¹. So, given that these unethical leaders have emerged from universities, it is apt to ask the questions 'what went wrong?' and 'does the university have a role to play in sculpting leaders who can influence and direct our institutions in moral practices?'

Literature suggests that unethical students continue on to demonstrate unethical behaviour later in business². This begs the question: 'does the university have some responsibility for guiding student moral development, or are morals firmly established before the student even gets to university?' Many would argue that morals, which determine behaviour, are firmly entrenched by what people learn within their families at an early age and by the societal influences to which they are exposed. This view suggests that nothing can be done to influence moral behaviour and that, by extension, exposure to an academic

environment can have little influence in shaping student behaviour and later behaviour in society. The alternative view is that education can shape moral behaviour by exposing students to ethical dilemmas with which they must grapple as well as to experiential classroom instruction³.

Shortly after the collapse of Enron in the United States in 2001, a flurry of activity took place in universities and business schools. Courses were introduced on business ethics, and 'corporate governance' and 'business ethics' became types of buzz concepts. Unfortunately, many of these courses were 'stand-alone' programmes which had little bearing on real life ethical dilemmas. As stand-alone programmes, they suggested that ethics and corporate governance were fields of business such as marketing or strategy. Ideally, ethics training or moral sensitivity needs to be integrated into all aspects of the academic curriculum so that ethics and sound corporate governance are positioned as integral to all the operations of business.

The argument being made here is that an academic education can be influential in promoting student moral development. However, three conditions need to exist: ethics instruction and instruction in sound corporate governance must be linked to real life issues with which the student can identify as opposed to abstract moral arguments; the university must have a policy of taking student transgressions seriously; and the university, itself, and its faculty, must role model exemplary ethical behaviour. One would expect no less of universities.

However, an ethical crack or corporate governance sinkhole, has come to the fore in academia. A recent study⁴ suggests that academics, themselves, while berating students for one form of unethical practice - plagiarism - are guilty of committing the same crime. In this study, 454 *published* articles from 19 management journals were found to have similarity in excess of 9 percent to other work that had already been published. In other words, these articles evidenced plagiarism, or the replication of the words or ideas of others without acknowledgment. An earlier study⁵ published in the prestigious *Academy of Management Learning and Education* journal found that 25 percent of papers submitted to an Academy of Management conference contained some degree of plagiarism. It is these academics who are instructing students and who should be role modelling exemplary ethical practices in the academy. It is questionable whether academics who cheat would take student cheating in their classrooms seriously. Faculty are key to role modelling ethics to students and, as such, universities, as the educators of future leaders in society, cannot simply teach business ethics or corporate governance as academic subjects; ethical leadership must be role modelled in practice.

One of the factors that lead to academic cheating is the pressure to publish, often known colloquially in academia as 'publish or perish', where social and financial rewards accrue to faculty based on the extent of their research output. Sadly, the quality of such output is often overlooked in favour of the quantity of output. The Department of Higher Education and Training also plays into this scenario by subsidising universities in terms of research output. So the incentive, both on the part of universities and on the part

of faculty, is to increase publication output. This incentive scheme has to urgently be reviewed. Given that universities have to ensure that their faculty role model sound ethics to students, internal introspection has to be part of the 'business'. Are faculty role modelling ethical behaviour to student groups, not only through their overt actions of ethical publishing, but in the way they deal sensitively with student diversity and inclusion, by timeous feedback on class work, by being available for student consultation? Are faculty of the calibre that, in coming years, students will be able to reflect on the quality of instruction they received and on the quality of their teachers who advanced such instruction? Will students be proud of the institutions from which they attained their degrees, or will such institutions be mired in academic scandal such as has been reported by academic plagiarism?

In summary, universities can influence the moral development of students and graduate students who make a difference in society. However, a large part of this instruction occurs, not in the classroom *per se*, but in the role modelling that faculty provide. The challenge to universities is to develop institutional cultures which reward faculty for playing meaningful roles in the lives of students and who, through their role modelling, contribute to the development of future leaders of society.

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