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Embedding ethics and ethical practice within and across the curriculum: emerging findings from a TQEF-funded project

Jacqueline Stevenson, Marie-Odile Leconte and Simon Robinson

Background and context

Leeds Met aims to be “a healthy, ethical, environmentally-friendly and sustainable community... whose members... value belonging to this community and sharing a sense of identity”, expressed in the University’s Vision and Character statement, endorsed by the Board of Governors (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2006).

These core values are designed to underpin everything the institution does and inform how students, staff and governors behave and respond to each other and the wider community – national and international – during their time at Leeds Met and subsequently. They also underpin the overall aim of higher education as inspiring and enabling individuals to serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy and to shape a democratic, civilised, inclusive society (NCIHE, 1997).

However, there are several difficulties with the conceptualisation of these values, particularly ethics, ethical principles and what comprises ethical behaviour at Leeds Met. First, the notion of what it means to be ‘ethical’ has not been made explicit and there is, perhaps, an assumption that all individuals and groups understand ethics in the same way. However, since educational institutions are microcosms of an increasingly diverse culture and the society that supports them, “claims to universal principles can easily be a mask to excuse one particular group imposing their ethics on another” (Strain, 2005, p. 46), while a set of universal ethical principles that is no particular group’s principles is not a set of principles at all (MacIntyre, 1981). Second, while recent work (CIHE, 2005) has identified the broader ethical challenges that higher education institutions need to explore and tackle, there has been insufficient exploration of ethics and ethical understanding among governors, staff and students within different Faculties at Leeds Met. Third, not all awards (and particularly not all levels within awards) explicitly explore notions of ethics with students. Consequently some students may not develop the requisite ethical understanding needed to mature into the type of learners and democratic citizens referred to above. Fourth, and on a more pragmatic level, students should have sufficient ethical awareness to enable them to conduct research in an ethical manner. However, our experiences as current

or former members of research ethics sub-committees indicate that this is not always so. Finally, good practice in developing notions of ethical responsibility with students is not being shared across the institution and there are insufficient exemplars of teaching materials that can be used with students.

The research

We are conducting research funded through the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund exploring how consideration of ethical practice can be embedded within the curriculum. The research will identify common understandings of ethics, ethical principles and ethical behaviour and the ethical knowledge, awareness, dispositions, skills and abilities that staff and students might need to develop to enable them to behave ‘ethically’ within the institution, develop as ethical researchers and understand and apply notions of professional ethics.

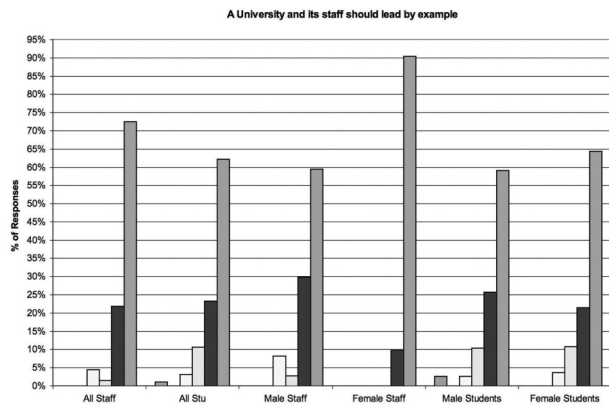
Methods

To date a web-based questionnaire has been sent to all academic staff and to undergraduate students registered on 42 courses and postgraduates on 20 courses – every fourth course in the list of Leeds Met courses. The response rate was low – 165 responses from 70 staff and 95 students – but highly diverse, although it is recognised that those who responded might not be typical of the sample as a whole. We did not survey staff outside Faculties as we were initially interested in exploring differences between students and the academic staff who teach them. The questionnaire asked a series of 30 questions headed “a university and its staff should...” and “a student should...”. Respondents were asked to grade their responses from 0 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) and to complete the questions: “an ethical university is...”, “an ethical member of staff is...” and “an ethical student is...”. All respondents were invited to participate in a follow-up semi-structured interview or focus group and all those who responded were either interviewed (5 students and 5 staff) or took part in a small focus group (6 staff) designed to explore responses in detail. We also requested interviews from all members of the Senior Executive Team and governors and undertook 10 further interviews with those who agreed to be interviewed.

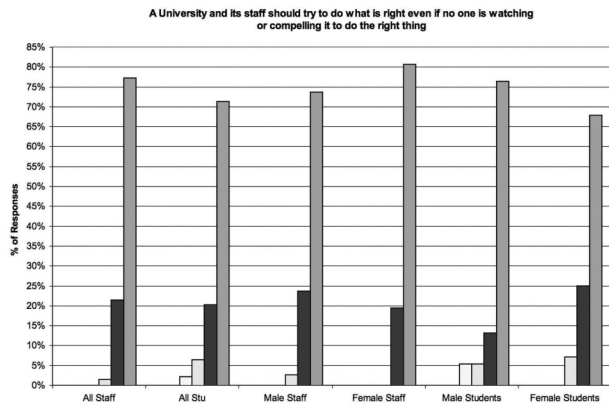
Results

Results were very mixed with strong agreement in some areas (see Figures 1a-d) and significant disagreement in others (see Figures 2a-d).

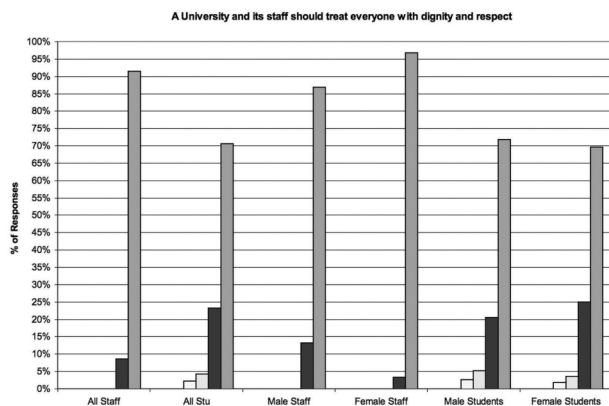
1a. Lead by example



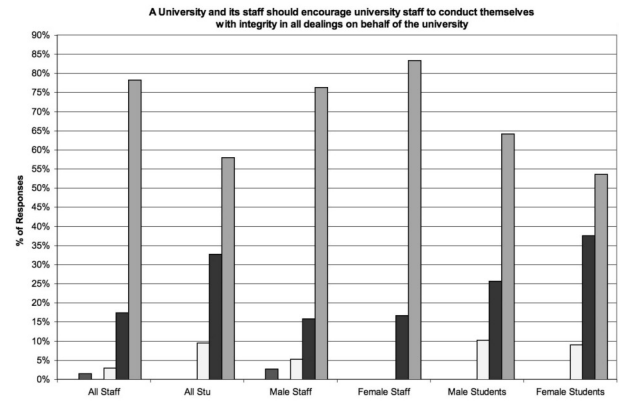
1b. Try to do what is right even if no one is watching or compelling to do the right thing



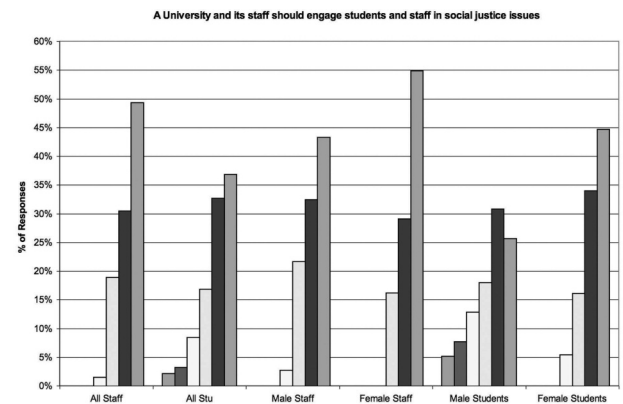
1c. Treat everyone with dignity and respect



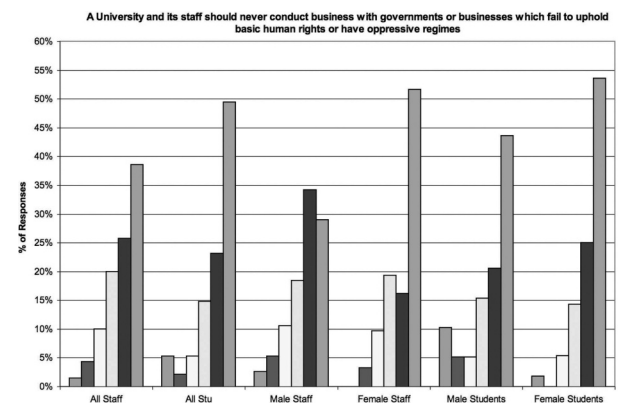
1d. Encourage university staff to conduct themselves with integrity in all dealings on behalf of the university



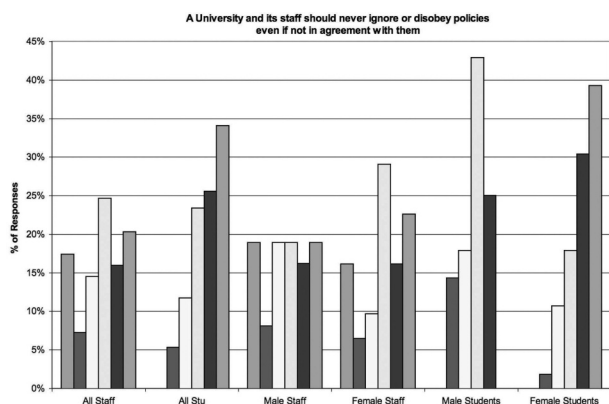
2a. Engage students and staff in social justice issues



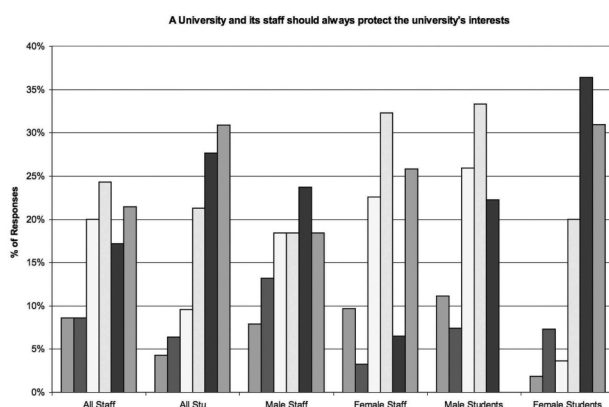
2b. Never conduct business with governments or businesses which fail to uphold basic human rights or have oppressive regimes



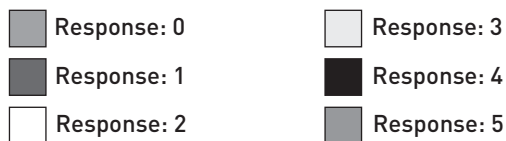
2c. Never ignore or disobey policies even if not in agreement with them



2d. Always protect the university's interests



Key



Areas of agreement

There was agreement that students and staff should behave towards each other in ways deemed to be fair. This included how students treated each other and how they implemented academic practice. For example, an ethical university was considered to be “one which is principled and upholds standards of equity, fairness and trust, treats all with respect and strives to achieve its stated aims fairly” (academic). An ethical member of staff one who is “fair, unbiased, respectful of students and others” (postgraduate student) and an ethical student one “fair to the lecturers and other staff when it comes to their shortcomings” (Level 2 student).

There was also consistent agreement that individuals should **lead by example**, even when they might not be being observed (see Figures 1a and 1b). For example, an ethical university was viewed as “one which upholds its ethical standards, leads by example, and attempts to educate others on ethical standards, their importance, and their implementation” (postgraduate student), with an ethical member of staff “one who is willing to share their ethical beliefs in the classroom and who leads by example” (Level 2 student).

Respondents also showed similarity across groups in arguing the need for individuals to be constantly **reflective** about their personal values and how these are put into practice. Thus an ethical university was “one which accepts its flaws, and constantly strives to improve” (Level 1 student), an ethical member of staff was “someone who accepts diverse religious, psychological, philosophical cultures its students and co-workers derive from. Someone who reflects, and ‘grows’ based on their consciousness change. Someone who questions, why? What is right? And if so how did it come to be right? Will it be right next year?” (Level 1 student) and an ethical student “one who continues to reflect on and question the influence he/she has on local and global communities and acts on the findings” (postgraduate student) and who is “thinking hard about ethics, and is striving, through reading and discussion, to find a consistent path through the ethical minefield” (academic).

Areas of disagreement

The area that engendered the greatest discrepancy in response was how to put ethical beliefs into **practice**, particularly where that practice might

require choices that have far-reaching consequences. Many respondents felt that ethical behaviour involved **action**, so that “an ethical member of staff walks the walk as well as talks the talk. They do not discuss the shameful behaviour of a company ... and then go along and buy their products” (academic). There was significant disagreement about what form this action should take, for example whether a university and its staff should “never ignore or disobey policies even if not in agreement with them” or “conduct business with governments or businesses which fail to uphold basic human rights or have oppressive régimes”. Both of these are actions that might have potentially significant personal consequences, which might explain the variety of responses.

Commentary

Clearly our research is only a small-scale snapshot of staff and student opinions. Nonetheless we have shown that, while there are commonalities of opinion amongst our diverse respondents regarding what they consider ethical principles and ethical behaviour to be, there are also clear differences. It is perhaps not unexpected that in an institution with a highly diverse staff and student population these differences of opinion will exist. However, our research not only challenges the notion of a shared ethical identity but raises more important questions which need to be explored further: how do we deal with ethics in a multicultural world? Where does the balance lie between respecting cultural diversity and ethical universalism? If we believe in universal ethics then what are our essential first principles? Should we make these first principles more explicit and require our staff and student body to sign up to them? What should we do if staff or students subsequently transgress them? What is the connection between personal, professional and institutional integrity?

We presented our findings at the Staff Development Festival in 2008 and many suggestions were made about how we could explore the notion of ethical behaviour further within the University. These included developing a ‘teaching ethics’ working group, with the aim of extending ethics teaching in Personal Development Planning and conventional modules, sharing good practice, and developing central resources; feeding findings from the

research into the newly formed University-wide Corporate Social Responsibility group; and establishing a programme of seminars and workshops designed to explore specific areas of interest over the next year. We welcome further comments and suggestions.

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- Jacqueline Stevenson**
Leslie Silver International Faculty
- Marie-Odile Leconte**
Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education
- Professor Simon Robinson**
Leslie Silver International Faculty