Ethical Learning Environment: Students' Perceptions

[1] **Kateriina Rannula, BA**
[1] **Ene Kotkas, MA**
[1] **Kristiina Puura, MA**
[1] **Kairi Lenk, MA**
[1] **Marina Kopti, RN**
[2] **Diana Sokolova**

[1] Tallinn Health Care College, lecturer, Estonia
[2] Tallinn Health Care College, student, Estonia

Abstract

Background: *Today`s fast-changing world and developments in health care system have indirect or direct effects on communication ethics. More and more unethical situations are faced by health care workers in their professional work. Thus, it is important to address the ethical aspects more seriously already in the learning environment.*

Objective: *To describe and analyze students` opinions on ethical aspects in their learning environment, behaviours considered unethical by them and possible reasons behind it.*

Methods: *The methodology combines theoretical and empirical parts, semistructured interviews conducted with 47 students were analysed.*

Results: *Students emphasized lecturers' personal qualities to be more important than general learning environment and the importance of respectful communication was also considered essential. Unethical behaviour is seen as lack of respect and manners from all parties involved.*

Conclusions: *Ethical behaviour and its various aspects should be included into the studies and discussed starting from the first course to ensure ethical learning environment and comminucation between academic staff and students.*

Keywords: *professional ethics, medical ethics, nursing ethics, communication and ethics.*

1. Introduction

According to Kumar Babu, ethics, also known as moral philosophy, is the branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct. The term ethics derives from the Ancient Greek word *ethos,* which means "habit" or "custom". (2015). For Josefová, ethics as a practical philosophy deals with moral aspects of human relationship, it cannot be separated from our everyday life. We ask what is right and what we should do, so ethics is the set of values and rules and it determines the given society or group, it is the moral behaviour inside the given society. (Josefová 2016:2).

Ethics helps to categorize different values such as integrity, discipline and honesty among others and apply them in daily lives. It influences behavior and allows an individual to make the right choices. Without ethics it will be very difficult to regulate life and act responsibly.

While the importance of ethics cannot be ignored in any walk of life it is imperative that they are practiced in the field of education. Ethics in education are essential asthey help run the system smoothly. (http://www.eddirect.com/resources/education/ethics-in-education).

According to Raudjärv, in higher educational institutions, ethical behaviour is a norm. That does not differentiate between lecturers, scientists and other specialists, also students. (Raudjärv 2006: 174). For Mercader, all disciplines rely upon a convergence of the application of ethical values in order to succeed and to improve in all areas of life and work. When students, teachers, and professors are conscious of what values they hold as well as those held by others, it will be easier to improve as well as resolve situations of all kinds (Mercader 2006: 162)

Based on the research by Hassel and Ridout, ensuring that students make the most of their university experience, and leave university with the best degree possible requires clear communication of the expectations that both parties, students and lecturers, have of each other. (Hassel and Ridout, 2018) It is summarized by Harro-Loit, that the quality of educational institution can be measured by academic results of students with different abilities and wellbeing of them during their study period (Harro-Loit 2017: 91.)

2.Theoretical background: ethics in education

The topic is actual as the rapid development of society and health care system has both, indirect and direct effect on communication ethics. According to Gülcan, in our present age, ethics has an important place in all areas of life. Ethics has also become important in education, because education is a fundamental process of human life. (Gülcan 2015: 2622)
By Nagpal&Das, the final stage of education is not to collect knowledge or enhancing skills or learning academic basics without understanding its value. It's important to recognize the essential moral elements present, especially in the behavior we reinforce and the virtues we promote everyday. (Nagpal&Das 2014: 2)

For Nair, institutions of higher education have a major role to play in preparing the younger generation for a propitious future. Apart from imparting quality education, they need to instill high ethical values and practices amongst the student fraternity. (Nair 2014: 230). Nagpal&Das also state that education and faculty play an important role in educating young people (Nagpal&Das 2014: 6) and according to Gluchmanova, teachers at all levels of education should ensure the cognitive, intellectual and moral progress of their students. (Gluchmanova 2015: 512) Nagpal&Das continue to argue that it is essential for academicians to be ethical themselves before they can raise ethical future leaders. (Nagpal&Das 2014: 6).

According to Johnson&Johnson, each person should be sure of his or her beliefs and values. Often, different value systems will lead to the same decisions, but sometimes they may result in significant differences. (Johnson&Johnson 2007: 151) Harro-Loit emphasizes the importance of cooperation in education based on which it can be analysed what people of different positions expect. (Harro-Loit 2017: 92,93)

By Nadelson, faculty, administrators, student affairs personnel, and students need to discuss how collaboration can be improved in order to foster healthy environments and also ethical behavior in students. (Nadelson 2006: 8) In addition, according to Boateng, students need to be motivated to patronize the opportunity to interact with their lecturers as part of the

university learning experience (Boateng 2012: 29) and for Gluchmanova, teachers should show them appropriate respect and appreciation. (Gluchmanova 2015: 512). Hassel&Ridout highlight that from a lecturer's perspective, reiterating the *active* and *self-governing* role that students need to play in their university education might resolve in students being more aware of the fact that they would need to accept full responsibility for their own academic success. (Hassel&Ridout, 2018).

Based on Mercadel, values in education tend to integrate students, teachers, and communities around a diversity of themes but the interesting issue is that all of these themes are interrelated and create connectiveness through the implementation of ethical values, directly or indirectly. (Mercadel 2006: 162) According to Dobmeier&Moran, adult educators are advised to create a friendly and supportive atmosphere. (Dobmeier&Moran 2008: 48) and Nadelson stresses the improtance of working towards a common goal through thoughtful activities which can enhance learning and development in higher education. (Nadelson 2006: 8).

3.Research background

There are many researches on ethics in education conducted by different researchers globally. Current research was started with an aim to investigate and describe communication problems related to professional ethics of the learners in Tallinn Health Care College in theoretical learning situations and during practical training and the usage and awareness of existing support systems when solving ethical problems. The first research task was to investigate and describe the students` opinions on learning professional ethics. Current part of the research will focus on the second research task, which was to investigate and describe students` perceptions of ethics in education. During the focus group interviews, three questions were asked to gain insight into the topic: *How do you perceive an ethical learning environment? Could you give some examples of unethical behaviour in learning environment? What are the causes of unethical behaviour in the learning environment?*

Forty seven students (seven students from the curriculum of Health Promotion Specialist, eight students from the curriculum of Nurse, six students from the curriculum of Midwife, seven students from the curriculum of Dental Technician, seven students from the curriculum of Assistant Pharmacist, five students from the curriculum Occupational Therapist, and seven students from the curriculum of Optometrist) participated in the research. To provide anonymity of lecturers and students, answers were not brought forth by study groups.

4.Research method

Research tasks were to (1) describe the students` opinions on learning professional ethics; (2) to describe the problems related to professional ethics in theoretical and practical training environment; (3) to describe and analyse the students awareness on professional ethics and the management of unethical problems in theoretical and practical training environment; (4) to map the awareness and usage of existing support system.

The methodology combines theoretical and empirical parts, semistructured interviews conducted with 47 first or second year students were analysed. The sample of the research is focus groups consisting of students. Student groups (all together 47 students) from the following curricula in Tallinn Health Care College voluntarily participated in the research: Health Promotion Specialist, Nurse, Midwife, Dental Technician, Assistant Pharmacist,

Occupational Therapist and Optometrist. The sample was created using a snowball method where an informant provides the contact of the next participant. Semi-structured focus group interviews were used, which enable to collect information from in-depth answers as well as ask for further specifications. Focus group was lead by a moderator whose task was to keep the discussion within the specified topic and create an environment free of social pressure. (Krueger, 2009). The duration of an interview varied from 1,5-2 hours, there were 5-7 participants in one focus group and the working language was Estonian.

The research process consisted of collecting scientific, evidence based information, conducting interviews, transcribing the information retrieved from the interviews, coding and categorization, analysis. Thematic content analysis and mainly horizontal analysis is used to analyze the respondents` answers. As it often occurred, the answers of the respondents within the interview were not full sentences but sometimes emotional short exclamations adding to the previous answer of the group member, the researchers interpretation of the answer includes the logical thought sequel. (Patton, 2002).

Current article focuses on the second research task, which was to describe the problems related to professional ethics in theoretical and practical training environment; examples from the interviews are brought out as divided into meaningful subgroups, which is followed by the discussion of the acquired knowledge.

5.Results

The following section will focus on presenting information on the second research task, which was to investigate and describe the students` opinions on learning environment. Three questions were asked to gain insight into the topic: *How do you perceive an ethical learning environment? Could you give some examples of unethical behaviour in learning environment? What are the causes of unethical behaviour in learning environment?*

Based on the interviews, the answers to the question "How do you perceive an ethical learning environment?", were divided into two main groups in order to bring out the students` opinions on lecturers` and students` behaviour separately.  According to typical opinions on lecturers` behaviour, four sub-groups were formed: transmission of information, feedback, attitude towards students, and personal qualities of lecturers. Opinions on students` behaviour were divided into two sub-groups: respect for lecturers, motivation and discipline.

Opinions on lecturers` behaviour:

Transmission of information

„Lecturers have to be correct and information provided by them has to be understandable"
„A lecturer has to inform students about test and exam results in time"

Feedback

„Lecturers should provide efficient feedback"
„Effective feedback should be focused on a student`s development"

Attitude towards students

„Lecturers have to be very polite and friendly"
„Lecturers should treat students well and equally"
„Positive attitude towards students is important"
„I think, empathy in some situations is needed"
„A lecturer should create conditions that make you feel good"

Personal qualities of a lecturer

„A lecturer should be honest and responsible for his/her statements"
„More enthusiasm from a lecturer towards their subject and teaching role is expected..."

Opinions on students` behaviour:

Respect for lecturers

„You have to respect your lecturers"
„You have to communicate with your lecturers respectfully"

Motivation and discipline

„Students should provide their own motivation and discipline…"
„Cheating and plagiarism are not accepted"

Based on the interviews, typical answers to the second question "Could you give some examples of unethical behaviour in learning environment?" were divided into two groups: opinions on lecturers` behaviour and opinions on students` behaviour.

Opinions on lecturers` behaviour:

„Inappropriate and offensive comments in the presence of other students…"
„It is very spiteful if a lecturer`s answer to your question is „you should actually know this..."
„A lecturer did not keep her word and used test questions that she promised to exclude from the exam"
„ One lecturer did not inform students about requirements for a paper properly and we got lower grades…"
„Feedback is mostly laconic and all students have the same comments…"
„Cheating in case of some students is not paid attention to, but others are punished for this…"
„A lecturer could not hold her emotions back and offended a student"

Opinions on students` behaviour:

„Some students behave unethically and do not respect lecturers"
„Cheating is common"
„Unethical communication with teachers is not accepted"
„Some students interrupt lectures by talking and laughing…"

Answers to the third question "What are the causes of unethical behaviour in the learning environment?" were divided into two groups: personal qualities and other causes.

Personal qualities:

„Bad behaviour, maybe…"

„A person does not know his/her limits, what is and what is not allowed to do…"
„People have different norms and limits"
„Beliefs do play a role"
„Poor communication skills"
„You cannot control your emotional triggers, and this is a big mistake..."
„Bad upbringing"
„Straightforward persons may be misjudged as impolite …"

Other causes:

„Heavy workload"
„Changes in timetable make working difficult for students and they become nervous"
„Every adult has some kind of life problems…"
„A person who values himself/herself and his/her profession cannot ignore ethics…"
„Ethics starts from your home…"
„Apathy and no motivation"

6. Discussion

According to Mercader, the need and importance of a study related to ethical values of college students has relevance and will help educators and others know more about ethical values and their influence in the education, work, and life of college students. (Mercader 2006: 162). Nagpal&Das add that all education must be ethics-oriented to equip the future nation builders for the performance of their task. (Nagpal&Das 2014: 6).

The Code of Academic Ethics of Tallinn Health Care College aims to support the organisational culture, which is based on the core values of the College (people, cooperation, inclusion, development), and to promote everyone`s development. Based on the Code, communication between a lecturer and a student is based on mutual respect and courtesy. The students participating in the research focused on behavioural aspects in learning environment only, no mention was made of physical environment. It follows that behaviour and communication play a major role in learning environment.

Based on the interviews, it became clear that students focused rather on their personal attitudes towards lecturers than on general learning environment. It is also noteworthy that the respondents were critical of other students who do not respect their lecturers and behave unethically in the learning environment. Based on the interviews, the answers to the question "How do you perceive an ethical learning environment?" show that transmission of information, feedback, attitude towards students, and personal qualities of lecturers are of great importance for students.

According to Gluchmanova, each teacher should clarify to the students, at the very beginning, the details of their study, the criteria of evaluation, the dates of their sessions, etc. (Gluchmanova 2015: 512). Students participating in current research also emphasized the importance of providing timely information, which is correct and understandable.
An effective feedback focusing on a student`s development was considered as a part of ethical learning environment by students. Based on Pennula and Jürimäe, a regular feedback is needed not only by students but by teachers as well. It will provide information on a student`s development, the progress towards his/her purposes and also on his/her success. Feedback is an essential prerequisite for targeted learning. (Pennula and Jürimäe 2017: 141).

Commenting on the ethical learning environment, the majority of opinions concerned lecturers` attitude towards students. Ozcan, Balyer and Servi also highlight that as members of academic team, faculty behaviors have vital influence on students' lives at universities. (Ozcan et al 2013: 129). According to Dobmeier&Moran, finding something positive in whatever learners say and do, need to be identified and evaluated. (Dobmeier&Moran 2008: 48). In view of respondents, a lecturer should create conditions that make them feel good in the learning environment. Lecturers are assumed to be polite, friendly and empathic. Positive attitude towards students and equal treatment is expected.

Based on Nillsen, the teacher should try to enable the student to maintain a balance between inner confidence and a feeling of being challenged, with the aim, over time and as required, of making the student able to accept intellectual challenge and independence with confidence, even with resolution. (Nillsen 2004: 89). Research demonstrates that personal qualities of a lecturer are no less important in view of the students. Qualities such as honesty, responsibility, and enthusiasm were revealed to be essential. According to Saul, an authentic lecturer cares for a student and has a wish to help him/her. (Saul, 2012).

Fewer comments were given on students` behaviour. Based on the typical answers of the respondents, respect for lecturers, and motivation and discipline of students are of great importance. All respondents emphasized that students must respect lecturers and communicate with them respectfully. They also revealed that students should be motivated and disciplined. For Kapur it is important that students should do not feel hesitant, apprehensive or anxious in communicating with the teachers. (Kapur 2018: 9). Respect is thus still expected from all parties.

Cheating and plagiarism were not accepted by the respondents. Dömeová & Jindrová state in their research conducted in Czech University that cheating can be viewed as a major educational problem with a broad social concern. The unethical behaviour of students can crucially influence their qualification, future employment and manner in their professional carrier. (Dömeová & Jindrová 2013: 77). This might be essentially true for health care workers whose responsibility and ethical standpoints are undoubtedly evident in all aspects of their work. According to Nadelson, developing students who behave ethically is an important mission for higher education. (Nadelson 2006:8).

Answers to the second question "Could you give some examples of unethical behaviour in learning environment?" were divided into two groups: opinions on lecturers` behaviour and opinions on students` behaviour. Based on the research by Reino, Vadi and Aidla, lecturers in Tartu University and Tallinn Technical University stated that the difference between a good and a very good lecturer was based on his/her attitudes and personal qualities rather than on his/her skills and knowledge. (Reino et al 2014). Reino, Vadi and Aidla conclude that "what he/she says will be forgotten anyway, but memory of him/her as a person will remain. (Reino et al 2014). Perhaps this is the lecturers true possibility of being a positive role model also ethics-wise, as the personal beliefs and values are to be remembered by the students even when the factual knowledge has been forgotten.

Participants in the current research also emphasized personal qualities of a lecturer such as honesty, responsibility, correctness, empathy, politeness, etc. Inappropriate and offensive comments in the presenece of other students, not keeping his/her promises, and providing incomplete information were mentioned as examples of lecturers` unethical behaviour. The

viewpoint of many researchers is that learning can only take place in a climate which is encouraging and mutually respectful, it is supported by Gluchmanova, who argues that each teacher should show an equal level of dignity to every person as an individual. (Gluchmanova 2015: 512).

Similar comments in feedback, unequal treatment, not holding his/her emotions back were also mentioned as examples of lecturers` unethical behaviour by respondents. According to Saul, a lecturer is able to maintain his/her authority and respect for him/her also in complicated situations, when he/she as a lecturer has to use his/her power but wronging no one. (Saul, 2012). Based on the research by Reino, Vadi and Aidla, a great number of lecturers in Tartu University and Tallinn Technical University find that it is very complicated to please everyone. (Reino, 2014). Respectful behaviour towards every student is something that perhaps does not apply to this statement. Ozcan, Balyer & Servi consider that faculty may not have enough time for each student in their office hours as well. It is evaluated that these problems may be the causes of the students' negative perceptions (Ozcan et al 2013: 139).

Comments on students` unethical behaviour were quite laconic. Disrespect for lecturers, unethical communication with lecturers, interrupting lectures and cheating were revealed by students. According to Dobmeier& Moran, adult learners sometimes exhibit behaviors that are disruptive to the learning process and that span a continuum that includes inattention and acting-out. (Dobmeier& Moran 2008: 46) They also state that adult educators have a responsibility to adult learners, to themselves, and to their field, to develop skills to deal with disruptive behavior. This will ensure a safe and stimulating learning environment for everyone. (Dobmeier& Moran 2008: 48). Adult educators are encouraged to prepare strategies for responding to disruptive behaviour. One should be prepared to address different situations depending on the present need, for example, asking a learner to pay attention by having a private word or by speaking to a group of inattentive learners publicly. (Dobmeier& Moran 2008:48).

Common answers to the third question "What are the causes of unethical behaviour in the learning environment?" were also divided into two groups: personal qualities and other causes. According to Dömeová & Jindrová, the ethical and unethical behaviour is a problem consisting of many individual properties and predispositions. (Dömeová & Jindrová 2013: 83). Johnson&Johnson state that sometimes we evaluate behaviour of other person wrongly as a result of which differences, conflicts and difficult situations may occur. (Johnson&Johnson 2007: 14). According to McKay, Davis & Fanning, each person should be sure of his or her beliefs and values. Often, different value systems will lead to the same decisions, but sometimes they may result in significant differences." (McKay et al 1995: 151).
Based on the interviews, more typical reasons for unethical behaviour are the following: a person does not know norms of behaviour, beliefs play a role, poor communication skills, bad parenting, emotional triggers etc.

According to Diana Kocanjer&Nikola Kadoić, moral values are always personal values, i.e. they are present only in person and only person itself can achieve them. These moral values can be developed through person"s judgement or opinion. A person must ask itself, whether what he/she doing is good, fair and beautiful, whether this procedure has a specific value and not only pleasure. (Kocanjer&Kadoić 2016: 88). The participants in the interview stated that *"A person who values himself/herself and his/her profession cannot ignore ethics…"* although they may have heavy workload or personal problems, which they considered causes

of unethical behaviour. Thus, they evaluate self-control and respect to others in complicated situations, too. Emotional triggers based on one`s personal problems are not accepted by respondents. For Kapur, teachers may feel stressed due to work pressure, problems and difficulties experienced in the management of the classrooms and students. In the classroom management strategies, it is vital for the teachers and students to control any kind of negative feelings and adequately implement anger and stress management strategies. (Kapur 2018: 3).

The respondents also stated that *„Ethics starts from your home…"* referring to a bad parenting resulting in uncontrolled behaviour. A comment "Straightforward persons may be misjudged as impolite ones" deserved the authors` attention as it can be concluded that students` expression of their own opinions may be taken as unethical behaviour by lecturers. Many researchers in the field stress the need to encourage students to express themselves honestly without fearing a dispute. According to Saul, an authentic lecturer is sincere and honest in his/her actions and words, and at the same time encouraging students to be authentic. (Saul, 2012). Based on Boateng, students need to be motivated to patronize the opportunity to interact with their lecturers as part of the university learning experience. (Boateng 2012: 29).

In addition to personal qualities, other causes such as changes in timetable, apathy and no motivation were revealed as causes of unethical behaviour by the respondents. Most students have a job in accordance with work schedule and in that regard changes in timetable may easily give rise to feelings of resentment in students.

The opinions concerning apathy and lack of motivation made the authors consider the existance of students or lecturers who are not very enthusiastic about their study or teaching. The respondents reasoned students` disruptive behaviour by inexperience of some lecturers who are very talanted in their professional work but do not have pedagogical qualification. In the authors´ view, an unattractive lecture is a disincentive to listen to and can cause disruptive behaviour of students. Based on the research by Reino, Vadi and Aidla, students give priority to motivation of a lecturer and it relates to both personal qualities and skills: a lecturer should generate interest in the subject, be enthusiastic, active, cheerful, be interested in the field, and have a sense of humour. Another important expectation is mastery of teaching. (Reino et al 2014). Authors continue that if students sense that lecturer does not value teaching and is unwilling to do his/her job, students` motivation will reduce. (Reino, 2014).

None of the students decided to enlighten the reasons for cheating although cheating was mentioned as an example of students` unethical behaviour. According to the conclusion of the research by Dömeová & Jindrová, majority of students try to reach the best results without their own intensive and regular work. Despite the fact that they are mostly aware of incorrectness of their behaviour they use some type of cheating to get some benefit usually better grade. (Dömeová & Jindrová 2013: 83). The emphasis of this point is again on the fact that the students will once in their professional lives become the role-models of trustworthiness and reliable behaviour. This should be emphasized in all first year subjects to avoid cheating on all levels.
For Dobmeier& Moran, the adult educator should look on instances of disruptive behavior as opportunities to teach and model behavior that is consistent with effective learning. (Dobmeier& Moran 2008: 48)

7. Conclusions

The analysis of the respondents` answers revealed that lecturers'personal qualities are preferred over general learning environment. Transmission of information, feedback, attitude towards students, and personal qualities of the lecturers are of great importance for students. The students also emphasized the importance of providing timely information, which is correct and understandable. The majority of opinions concerned lecturers` attitude towards students. In view of respondents, a lecturer should create conditions that make them feel good in the learning environment. Lecturers are assumed to be polite, friendly and empathic. Positive attitude towards students and equal treatment is expected. The qualities such as honesty, responsibility, and enthusiasm were revealed by respondents. Mastery of teaching is expected.

Fewer comments were given on students` behaviour. Based on typical answers of the respondents, respect for lecturers, and motivation and discipline of students are great of importance. All respondents emphasized that students must show respect to the lecturers and communicate with them respectfully. They also revealed that students should be motivated and disciplined. Cheating and plagiarism were not accepted by the respondents.

Inappropriate and offensive comments in the presence of other students, not keeping his/her promises, and providing incomplete information were brought out as examples of lecturers` unethical behaviour. Comments on students` unethical behaviour were quite laconic. Disrespect for lecturers, unethical communication with lecturers, interrupting lectures, and cheating were revealed by students. Based on the interviews, more typical reasons for unethical behaviour are the following: a person does not know norms of behaviour, personal beliefs have a role in persons behaviour, poor communication skills, bad parenting, emotional triggers, etc.

In addition to personal qualities, other causes such as changes in timetable, apathy and no motivation were revealed as examples of unethical behaviour by the respondents. According to Nadelson, faculty, administrators, student affairs personnel, and students need to discuss how collaboration can be improved in order to foster healthy environments and also ethical behavior in students. Working towards a common goal through thoughtful activities can enhance learning and development in higher education. (Nadelson 2006: 8).

The research offered valuable insight into what is considered as an unethical situation and behaviour in the learning environment and what is considered important in creating an ethical environment. It is essential that mutual respect and lecurers' authenticity are visible and felt in every learning situation, whether in theoretical or practical one, as this is perhaps the learning that is vital to every future health care worker in order to develop their professional, ethical identity.

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