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Being an academic in universities today is characterised by change and increasing complexity in response to a multitude of factors impacting on the university sector. Among the consequences of such changes are that many academics, and academic leaders in particular, are subjected to both increasing stress and scrutiny in many of the decisions they make. Some of these decisions require critical choices that involve contestation of values (including personal, professional, institutional, and community), resulting in ethical dilemmas for the decisionmakers. This article reports on an exploratory study into ethical dilemmas faced by middle-level academic leaders, drawing on the results of an on-line survey distributed to relevant academics in three universities in Australia. Here, middle-level academic leaders are defined as those holding course coordination roles, locating them between senior university staff

**An exploratory study of ethical dilemmas faced by academic leaders in three  
Australian universities**

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**Abstract**

*Being an academic in universities today is characterised by change and increasing complexity in response to a multitude of factors impacting on the university sector. Among the consequences of such changes are that many academics, and academic leaders in particular, are subjected to both increasing stress and scrutiny in many of the decisions they make. Some of these decisions require critical choices that involve contestation of values (including personal, professional, institutional, community), resulting in ethical dilemmas for the decision-makers. This article reports on an exploratory study into ethical dilemmas faced by middle-level academic leaders, drawing on the results of an on-line survey distributed to relevant academics in three universities in Australia. Here, middle-level academic leaders are defined as those holding course coordination roles, locating them between senior university staff and other academics on the one hand and students on the other hand. As a consequence, these diverse groups of staff and students potentially have an array of conflicting interests in, and expectations on, middle-level academics' decision-making processes. The findings of the study are*

*clear: ethical dilemmas are evident, and commonly so, for many middle-level academic leaders. While exploratory in nature, the findings of this study suggest that much more attention to ethics and ethical dilemmas is needed in our universities.*

# **An exploratory study of ethical dilemmas faced by academic leaders in three Australian universities**

## **Introduction**

There is little doubt that the “life” of academics has changed and continues to change in response to a multitude of factors impacting on the university sector, nationally and internationally. Indeed, as we have noted elsewhere, “higher education has changed dramatically over the last couple of decades creating a complex organisational milieu in which academics and academic leaders must now work ... (such that they) ... are likely to face a multitude of conflicting interests as they seek to balance a variety of expectations in their decision-making processes” (Ehrich, Kimber, Cranston, & Starr, 2011, p. 50). It is these decision-making processes, and the potential for ethical dilemmas to arise in such processes for academic leaders, that provides the focus of this article, emphasising Ciulla’s (2006) view that ethics is at the heart of leadership.

The article reports on an exploratory study into ethical dilemmas faced by middle-level academic leaders, drawing on the results of an on-line survey distributed to relevant academics in three universities in Australia. For the purposes of this study, middle-level academic leaders are defined as those holding Course Coordination roles, locating them

in the milieu of senior university staff, other academics and students, such that they potentially have an array of conflicting interests in, and expectations on, their decision-making processes. The findings of the study indicate that ethical dilemmas are evident, and commonly so, for many middle-level academic leaders, across all faculty areas. They have the potential to create significant challenges for university staff. The findings of this study start to address a dearth of research in the area, responding to the challenge of Keith-Spiegel and Carr (1993, p. 1), who observed that “publications and research on ethical dilemmas facing teaching faculty at the university level is scanty”. The study concludes by arguing that much more attention to ethics and ethical dilemmas is needed in our universities.

### **Background and context for the study**

Universities, like most other organisations, have undergone major changes in recent years that have reshaped academic work (Macfarlane, 2004; Fitzmaurice, 2008). For example, as Marginson (2000) has observed, universities have had to struggle with ways of pursuing funding from business, industry and other bodies, while at the same time seeking to pursue the goals of higher education: to create knowledge through research and to disseminate knowledge via publications and teaching (Baldwin, 1997). Further, universities now actively compete for students, both at home and abroad, and often engage in aggressive marketing strategies to attract enrolments to their institutions (Currie and Newson, 1998). Currie and Newson have noted that some of the negative consequences of the changes to higher education for academics have included increasing

workloads and work stress, falling morale, reduced autonomy and freedoms, and alienation from work. Academic staff are now under increasing pressure not only to research and publish quality work in appropriately ranked journals but also to provide excellence in teaching and learning (Fitzmaurice, 2008).

The operational context of universities is impacted by a range of factors such as globalisation, technology developments, global financial and political fragilities, policy uncertainty at the political level and enhanced accountabilities (including the national and international ranking of institutions). All these factors have led to intense competition within and across institutions, resulting in significant pressures on, and a reshaping of, academic work (Cranston, Ehrich, Kimber, & Starr, 2011). In such contexts, academic leaders are likely to be exposed to a “multitude of competing obligations and interests” (Cooper, 1998, p. 244), such that their decision-making is likely to be subjected to greater factors, stressors and scrutiny. Many such decisions potentially involve contestation of values, leading to ethical dilemmas for individuals.

Thus our focus here is the impact of these pressures on academics and their ethical practices; particularly, as Whitton (1998) and others have argued, such pressures and complexities that are inherent in modern organisations create the conditions for ethical dilemmas to flourish. An ethical dilemma, for the purposes of this study, is defined as:

A situation where you feel that you have been required to make a decision (or have observed a decision taken or action performed by others) that you consider

problematic or wrong/inappropriate. For instance, in your view, values, principles (your own, your university's) or codes of conduct have been challenged as a result of the decision or action. In such situations, you may feel personally and/or professionally uncomfortable (adapted from Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2003a, 2003b, 2006).

That ethical dilemmas might be likely to arise in institutions such as universities is not surprising as our work in other organisational contexts suggest that they are much more prevalent than might be expected, and certainly are not discussed or researched to the extent their importance and impact on individuals and organisation generally suggests they ought to be (Begley & Johansson, 2003). For example, our earlier work with senior public sector leaders (Ehrich, Cranston, & Kimber, 2004) and school leaders (Cranston et. al., 2003b; 2006) highlighted the tensions ethical dilemmas create, particularly in situations where decisions are required where a number of acceptable or equally attractive options are evident. As Kidder (1995) notes, “(t)he really tough choices, then, don’t centre upon right versus wrong. They involve right versus right. They are genuine dilemmas precisely because each side is firmly rooted in ... core values” (p. 18). So common are such situations for many leaders that one school principal in an earlier study argued that ethical dilemmas were the “bread and butter” of his work (Cranston et. al., 2006). To illustrate the situation in educational contexts, Helton and Ray (2005) identified several categories of ethical dilemmas facing teachers in both schools and universities. These dilemmas illustrate the potentially vast landscape from which ethical dilemmas may arise

- law and policies — the need to go beyond the law such as protecting a student from abuse in the home;



- administrative decisions conflicting with personal or professional ethics;
- student actions — ethic of care, behavioural issues, plagiarism;
- colleagues' actions such as discriminatory behaviour in relation to students and staff;
- tensions within professional ethics.

Ethical dilemmas, then, emerge when a person is required to make a decision that requires a choice among competing sets of values and principles, often in complex and value-laden contexts. There is an important distinction between a dilemma and an ethical dilemma. A dilemma involves a choice between two alternatives (i.e., A or B), while an *ethical* dilemma is concerned with conflicts that involve values (Rhodes, 1989; Trevino, 1986) or “conflicting moral principles” (Kirby, Paradise, & Protti, 1992, p. 25). As pointed out above, real difficulties can occur when equally attractive options could be justified as ‘right’ (Duignan & Collins, 2003; Kidder, 1995) and conversely, when there are only equally unattractive options with equally undesirable consequences. Finding the right option is unlikely to be a easy (Burke, 1997).

Despite this work and that of others (for example, Strom-Gottfried & D’Aprix, 2006), to date, there has been only limited research in the field of ethics concerning academics and academic leaders, and even a smaller body on the ethical tensions and dilemmas faced by university academics or academic leaders. Among what is available, Macfarlane (2004, 2009) has noted that much of it concerns unethical practices in research such as the falsification of data, misuse of research funds and plagiarism. Other forms of unethical

behaviour in universities have been categorised as the misuse of power and power relationships among key players (Ashford & Davis, 2006). Robie and Keeping (2004) cite three examples of unethical behaviours by academics and these include: involvement in sexual activities with students in exchange for grades; accepting money or gifts in exchange for grades; and plagiarism. Morgan and Korschgen (2001) suggest that much of the discussion about ethical behaviour in universities has focused on topics such as sexual harassment, while issues emerging from teacher-student relationships and interactions have not received the same focus.

Related work by Fitzmaurice (2008) explored the philosophy of teaching held by academics to determine to what extent they revealed insights into moral practice. This research indicated that lecturers identified good teaching as not only concerned with effective teaching methods but also ethical and moral issues. Key themes identified as important by lecturers in higher education included: “a deep obligation to help students learn; a desire to create a space for learning and encourage student voice; caring for students and developing the whole person; reflection on practice; and, professional values and morals” (Fitzmaurice, 2008, p. 345). The last theme points to the importance of the teacher-student relationships and values of care, responsibility and respect for students.

Finally, a study by Tirri (1999) of secondary teachers’ moral dilemmas in teaching is worth noting. Tirri found that there were four main categories of dilemmas. These related to: (1) teachers’ work, such as how to deal with students, confidentiality and situations

where colleagues were unprofessional; (2) student behaviour including cheating; (3) rights of minority groups where religion was a key aspect of the dilemma; and (4) inconsistency in teachers following institutional rules. Tirri's research findings are consistent with our earlier work (Cranston et al., 2006) that explored the ethical dilemmas faced by school principals. In our previous qualitative study (Cranston et al., 2006), the two major areas of ethical dilemmas principals grappled with concerned, perhaps not surprisingly, student and staff issues.

Importantly, the outcomes of decision-making in contested situations such as those noted here give rise to a number of significant consequences for both the individuals directly involved and the institution more broadly (Cranston et al., 2006; Ehrich et al., 2011). In reaching these outcomes, our earlier work identified a number of forces or factors at play, differentially evident depending on the nature of the dilemma. These forces, such as political, cultural, legal, and so on) are summarised in a model of ethical decision-making we have developed and tested (Ehrich et al., 2011 – the model is provided in the appendix) and represent different external influences or contexts on the decision and the decision-maker. The model also points to the importance of precedents being established as a consequence of the decision, such that later similar decisions (or decisions perhaps perceived to be similar by others in the organisation) may be subjected to even greater scrutiny. Importantly, the decision-making process and the decision itself help shape and define the organisational culture, especially as that culture may relate to institutional values. That is, the reach of ethical dilemmas is potentially wide and deep for individuals as well as organisations.

Having briefly explored some of the relevant extant literature on ethics and ethical dilemmas, we now turn our attention to the survey results.

### **This study - methodology**

As noted above, this exploratory study focussed on the ethical dilemmas faced by middle-level leaders, viz. Course Coordinators, in the three universities of the authors of this paper. The universities are located in three different states of Australia with each being relatively large multi-campus institutions – one is the only university in the state, with approximately 50 000 students; the other two are one of a number of universities in the different cities/states in which they are located - each of these has enrolments of approximately 40 000 students. Each university was expected to have up to approximately 150 Course Coordinators.

Course Coordinators were defined as academics who held responsibility for leading and managing particular graduate or postgraduate degree, diploma, or certificate offerings (e.g., Bachelor of Education, Graduate Diploma in Business, and so on). Specifically, the *purposes* of the study were to

- identify the prevalence of ethical dilemmas faced by university Course Coordinators;
- explore the nature of these ethical dilemmas and the factors at play within them.

Due to institutional privacy restrictions, lists of Course Coordinators were not readily available in all cases, such that the researchers in each of the three universities determined the most appropriate strategy to identify the respondents in their respective institutions. As noted earlier, Course Coordinators include those responsible for Graduate Diploma, Graduate Certificate, Bachelor, Master, post-graduate research, and non-award courses. While slightly different strategies to target Course Coordinators were used in each university depending on local circumstances, typically, Deans, Heads of School or their designates were used as points of contact for email distribution. It is estimated that approximately 400 invitations were distributed in this way.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, with respondents assured that their anonymity and that of their institutions would be maintained. Follow-up reminders were used in each of the universities to maximise returns using the same strategies to target Course coordinators as employed in the original distribution of the surveys. It was not intended that the data be used to make cross institutional comparisons.

Participation involved responding to an on-line survey, requiring approximately 15 minutes to complete. No names of individuals, faculties, or institutions were requested. The survey was slightly modified from a similar instrument used to examine ethical dilemmas among senior public servants (Ehrich et al., 2004). Research findings from earlier studies undertaken by the authors, especially a model developed for understanding and analysing ethical

dilemmas (Cranston et al., 2003a, 2003b; Ehrich et al., 2011), also contributed to the design of the survey.

The survey — *Ethical Dilemmas in Universities Survey (EDUS: Course Coordinators* — provided respondents with a definition of an ethical dilemma (as state above) and comprised five general biographical items (e.g., gender, academic level, faculty/school/department), 10 items in Likert-type format that looked at the nature and extent of respondents' ethical dilemmas, an open-ended item that asked respondents to think about one particular ethical dilemma they had experienced or observed in their work and to briefly describe this dilemma, including how the ethical dilemma “came to a head”, and if and how it was resolved. The final item asked respondents to indicate what forces were evident in the dilemma. An optional open-ended item seeking any further comments concluded the survey.

One hundred and seventy-four responses (61% female; 39% male) were received across the three universities. While it is difficult to determine the number of Course Coordinators who received the survey given the less than direct strategies used to target such office holders, it is estimated that the survey achieved about a 45% response rate, representing a sound level of responses. . Although not all participants answered every question, the majority provided written comments to the open-ended items, some providing quite extensive statements. These statements were systematically examined and categorised, using Marton's (1988) approach whereby comments are brought together

into categories based on their similarities, with categories being differentiated from one another in terms of their variances.

## **Results and findings**

All academic levels were represented in the survey responses, with the majority (approximately 60%) from Senior Lecturer and Lecturer levels. There was similarly a spread across years of experience as an academic, with the majority (approximately 70%) having more than five years as an academic. All major faculties/schools/departments were represented with the majority from non-science areas as summarised in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Percentage of respondents by faculty/school/department**

<b>Arts</b>	<b>Business M'gt</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Health Science</b>	<b>Law</b>	<b>Science Engineering Technology</b>	<b>Visual &amp; Performing Arts</b>	<b>Other</b>
8%	18%	21%	16%	7%	19%	4%	7%

The results of the survey items are now considered.

Table 2 summarises the closed item responses that describe the workplace with regard to ethical practices and attention to ethical matters. Given the exploratory nature of the study, percentage responses are combined for two of the four response options. For the *To what extent* items, *great extent* and *some extent* percentage responses were combined (other options relevant were *no extent* and *not sure/don't know*. For the *How often* items, *often* and *sometimes* percentage responses were combined (other options were *rarely* and *never*.)

**Table 2: Ethical practice and the workplace – all respondents**

<b>Items</b>	<b>Percentage responses</b>
<b><i>To what extent ...</i></b>	<b>great extent + some extent %</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Ethical practice is evident in your workplace</i></li> <li>• <i>You believe you model ethical practice</i></li> </ul>	92 99
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The culture of the university is conducive to ethical practice</i></li> <li>• <i>You believe staff act ethically in your workplace</i></li> <li>• <i>Ethical practice is rewarded in your workplace</i></li> </ul>	90 97 41
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>A code of conduct (or behaviour) is used or made overt in the university</i></li> </ul>	73
<b><i>How often ...</i></b>	<b>often + sometimes %</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Your supervisors hold discussions about acting ethically</i></li> </ul>	33
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Ethics training occurs in the university</i></li> </ul>	38
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>You have personally experienced ethical dilemmas in your work</i></li> <li>• <i>You have observed ethical dilemmas impacting on others in your workplace</i></li> </ul>	60 65

Despite the fact that respondents saw that acting ethically was not really rewarded in their workplace, the overwhelming majority believed ethical practice was evident (92%) and that they as individuals (99%) and other staff (97%) acted ethically to some or a great extent. Indeed, the majority (90%) also saw that the overall culture of the university was conducive



to ethical practice, with about three-quarters indicating a code of conduct (or behaviour) was made overt in their workplace. However, only about one-third reported that their supervisors discussing ethical practices or that their university provided ethics training. In summary, the suggestion here is that, while institutionally there is only minimal incentive and support for academics to behave ethically, the vast majority of the Course Coordinators responding to this survey indicated ethical practices were evident to some extent. Results are also similar across faculties/schools/departments, with the highest reporting of ethical practice evident in the workplace for education and the lowest for visual and performing arts. There are no clear trends or differences on ethical practices in the workplace for level/position of the respondents or years as an academic.

Despite the reported ethical nature of universities, when asked specifically about ethical dilemmas (defined as indicated earlier), almost two thirds of academic leaders indicated having experienced these personally and about the same number reported observing such dilemmas impacting on others in their workplace. Clearly, ethical dilemmas are evident in universities as reported by these Course Coordinators. Of note is that female respondents report the existence of ethical dilemmas more than their male counterparts, as experienced by themselves as well as observed happening to others. Results are similar across the faculties/schools/departments, with the highest reporting of ethical dilemmas for business/management and the lowest for science/engineering/technology. There are no clear trends or differences on experiencing or observing ethical dilemmas in the workplace for level/position of the respondents, although they are reported to be more evident by those with five or more years experience as an academic.

As indicated above, respondents were asked to think about a particular ethical dilemma and to try to identify the key factors or forces evident in the dilemma, then rate the factor as major, minor or not evident. The options provided from which respondents could choose were based on the model for analysing ethical dilemmas referred to earlier. It should be noted that the factors/forces may act positively or negatively with regard to the particular dilemma, i.e., they may contribute to the ethical dilemma arising or they may act as a mediating factor. These results are summarised in Table 3 below. *Major* and *minor* percentage responses are combined to provide an overall indication of the most significant factors/forces at play.

**Table 3: Factors/forces evident in ethical dilemmas**

<b>Factor/force</b>	<b>major + minor %</b>
• <i>Workplace culture</i>	92
• <i>Professional ethics, standards</i>	88
• <i>Personal ethics, values</i>	93
• <i>Serving the public good</i>	56
• <i>Community &amp; societal forces/factors</i>	68
• <i>Legal forces/factors</i>	60
• <i>Financial forces/factors</i>	51
• <i>Forces/factors beyond the immediate workplace</i>	54
• <i>Political forces/factors</i>	55
• <i>Instructions from more senior staff member</i>	70
• <i>Other</i>	5

All of the factors/forces listed are noted across the ethical dilemmas by the respondents.

This is not surprising, given the model builds on earlier research. However, it is

instructive to consider the most significant factors — this can be done by a simple classification as follows. *First level* factors/forces (i.e., >80% major + minor) included personal ethics, values; workplace culture; and professional ethics, standards. *Second level* factors/forces (60-80%) included instructions from senior staff member; community & societal and legal. *Third level* factors/forces (< 60%) included political factors; factors beyond immediate workplace; and, financial factors. What these data suggest are that, perhaps not surprisingly, personal, professional and workplace ethics are the most critical factors/forces in ethical dilemmas. It is here that contestation of values across individuals and institutions come into play.

Almost every respondent provided an example of an ethical dilemma and/or some additional comments in the final (optional) open-ended items. Many provided extended commentary on matters about which they clearly felt very strongly. This response suggests that many academics, at least this group of Course Coordinators, are keen to discuss matters of an ethical nature in their work, and in particular, some of the ethical dilemmas they encounter or observe in carrying out their leadership responsibilities.

The following discussion highlights some important points made by respondents about ethical dilemmas in the open-ended comments. Some direct quotes are used to illustrate. We then consider some general points relevant to our focus.

Not surprisingly, there is a continuum in the views of Course Coordinators with regard to ethics, ethical dilemmas and their workplaces. One noted that:

*The climate in the faculty does not make it likely that individuals will make a stand on ethical issues.*

While another provided a contrasting view that:

*My workplace is a very collegial and supportive one in which community values and commitment are highly valued. There is a strong culture of ethical practice, both towards colleagues and towards students.*

A disparity in discussion about ethics was noted when research and teaching were compared. For example, one Course Coordinator noted that:

*Ethics as part of research is focused on heavily in my university. Ethics in regard to teaching is rarely discussed.*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most comments about ethics and ethical dilemmas tended to be of a negative nature, with many focusing on apparent unfair favourable treatment for particular students, and in a limited number of cases for staff. The student focus resonates with our earlier work in schools:

*The pressure to pass or give high grades especially to fee paying students is a major ethical dilemma.*

One Coordinator stated:

*I have observed Course Coordinators, part time, and full time staff being pressured to raise marks for students against their judgement. Similarly, cases of plagiarism are dealt with very leniently against junior staff objection. Inferred or explicit direction to 'pass' students comes from senior academics and is tacitly supported by management. The ethical dilemma is that to challenge this culture would require taking action outside of the School.*

The importance of ethics and managing ethical dilemmas is significant for many Course Coordinators, exemplified by the following comment. Noteworthy is the personal and professional pressure and commitment these matters require:

*Sorting through ethical dilemmas in my role as unit coordinator is one I take seriously; it causes me angst and effort. These issues are often the most unpleasant aspect of my work role. It is made harder by inconsistency in how other staff deal with such issues. Where other staff ignore ethical situations, some students use that behaviour to place pressure on me not to take action. Those students act surprised or indignant when I follow up with them, to ensure equity with others.*

What is interesting in many of the comments is that they tend to drift outside the realm of ethics and ethical dilemmas, crossing over into critical and reflective observations of life as an academic. Such comments are important because they emphasise and illustrate some of the key points made earlier in this paper about the changing roles, responsibilities and expectations of academics. Many of these changes impact even more significantly on those in leadership positions (such as the Course Coordinators here) as the nature and context of their decision-making responsibilities become more complex, with the implications and impact more significant. One area where this resonated with many respondents concerned the standard of some students' work and student expectations placed on academics. Course Coordinators particularly mentioned the pressure to "pass" such students, especially fee-paying students and international students. The following comments illustrate this point:

*International students who are not even close to possessing the requisite language skills are admitted, and then struggle to cope with the material. Yet the changing*

*demographics (performance/ability) are hidden by changes to material or assessment or grading.*

*There is too great an emphasis on shifting standards to meet the (in)capabilities of students in order to keep failure rates low. This is expressed in the "problematization" of units and coordinators with high failure rates, on the assumption that there has been no change in the capabilities of students who take the course, against a backdrop of increasing emphasis on tertiary education which means the net is spreading wider. This amounts to a compromising of standards.*

*Pressure being exerted to give students passing grades when the quality of their work in assessment does not warrant it.*

Plagiarism, mainly by students but in some instances by staff, was another issue that surfaced regularly in respondents' comments.

*The ethical dilemma under consideration is the issue of plagiarism. Various lecturers have varying views on the meaning or the value of enforcing plagiarism for undergraduate students. Those that try to enforce the requirements for*

*appropriate referencing can be maligned by fellow colleagues. Attempts to involve the Head of School result in little action.*

Academic dishonesty, especially as it relates to postgraduate students, was noted by a number of respondents concerning the unethical marking of theses. For example:

*Unethical marking practices of Honours theses involving conflicts of interest, failure to apply equitable processes across all students in a cohort, and failure to adhere to principles of natural justice.*

A number of respondents proposed that measures to enhance the transparency of decision making would minimise unethical behaviour and potentially reduce the incidence of ethical dilemmas. The following illustrates this:

*Policies and procedures can lack transparency, there is a lot of case-by-case basis kind of approach which ultimately helps no-one. Very easy to abuse a "case-by-case" analysis of an individual's situation (by either the university or the individual)*



*Keeping discussion open and legitimate regarding the basis of ethical decision making would be helpful.*

The lack of training for academics in ethical practices and apparent lack of organisational commitment to same (as noted in the closed items) was captured well by the following respondent:

*In my experience as a Course Coordinator, staff often relied on word of mouth for advice in dealing with ethical dilemmas instead of consulting a ... Code of Conduct or other policies existing in the Faculty. They seemed to "make it up as they went along" rather than rely on any principles or policies. In my time as a Coordinator, I tried to instil a culture of referring to policies etc, but it was VERY difficult!*

The extensive nature of the comments offered in the survey suggests that academics (academic leaders in particular) are seeking avenues to articulate the challenges of an ethical nature on their work and a plea for understanding about these is also evident.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

This exploratory study across three Australian universities suggests that ethical issues generally, and ethical dilemmas in particular, are evident in the work of academic Course Coordinators. The findings point to a clear need for further follow-up research. Importantly, as identified by other researchers (Macfarlane, 2004; Fitzmaurice, 2008), this situation is occurring in a context of challenges to, and a reshaping of academic work. While most respondents described their workplaces as ethical and their colleagues as acting ethically, when given the chance to comment on such matters, most respondents in this study identified cases where they believed less than ethical practices were evident. Issues around attracting students, student standards, and pressures to pass non-performing students were often mentioned, supporting the work of Currie and Newson (1998) and others. These issues, and many others identified by respondents, are characteristic of the many competing obligations and interests impacting on the work of academics (Cooper, 1998). Certainly, the issues raised about students resonate closely with the work of Fitzmaurice (2008) where most academics demonstrate a deep commitment to their students but find (ethical) impediments often affecting this commitment.

In many ways, the comments of two Course Coordinators summarise the essence of ethics and ethical dilemmas faced by these academics.

*Competing principles of equity, fairness give rise to dilemmas.*

*At the end of the day, I always ask the question: What would I want someone to do if the action they took or did not take would have an effect on my family members. ... the most important elements to me are personal ethics and values and serving the public good.*

Such sentiments are consistent with our earlier work with senior public servants and school leaders where values are at the core of these dilemmas and complex decision-making processes. As we noted earlier, in essence, ethical dilemmas are conflicts that involve values or moral principles (Rhodes, 1989; Kirby et al., 1992).

The apparent lack of any major level of organisational commitment to both discuss and develop the ethical capacities among academic staff is a cause for concern and provides a key point for action in universities. Some of the cases provided by the respondents in this study would provide rich and challenging talking points to initiate such professional learning (Langlois & Lapoint, 2010; Shapiro & Hassinger, 2007). Such learning and more open sharing of some of these challenges facing middle-level leaders in universities such as Course Coordinators may well address the frustration among many about a sense of powerlessness to do anything about observed unethical practice. Indeed, there is even a lack of “space” for articulation and discussion of these dilemmas. Perhaps this research can contribute to a dialogue about such matters.

This study points to a need for further research and debate about many of the matters it raises. It also raises a number of implications for policy and practice, including the need for individual institutions to ensure that academics, and academic leaders in particular, are clearly aware of the expectations and responsibilities around ethical practices likely to emerge in undertaking their roles. Indeed, while there needs to be an emphasis on highlighting policy implications and accountabilities, we would argue that academics also need to critically and practically engage in on-going professional learning about ethics, and in particular, the complexities and realities of ethical dilemmas. One way forward here is through the use of case study scenarios that academics might consider in dynamic workshop activities. Such case studies could readily be developed from some of the data in this study. This approach would engage participants in ethical dilemma scenarios similar to those they might encounter everyday, with the model (see appendix) offering a referencing framework for understanding and analysing the dilemma. The rhetoric of policies about ethics and ethical decision-making is thus transferred into the day-to-day realities of academic leaders.

Organisational life in universities is unlikely to become less complex in the future. Nor is it likely that academic life will become more predictable. Rather, the challenges to academics, those in leadership positions in particular, are likely to evolve, as noted earlier. Because academic life is so much about people — students, academics, and a growing number of other stakeholders — there will often be a contestation of values when critical and complex decisions are required. This is the very essence of ethics and ethical dilemmas. We need to know a lot more about these aspects of academic work.

Hopefully, this study will create some momentum to that end so we better understand the challenges around critical decision-making faced by middle-level leaders (indeed all leaders) in our universities.

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