

Students' Perceptual Change of Professional Ethics after Engaging in Work-Integrated Learning

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When students undertake work placements, they become immersed in a relevant community of practice, where they are required to meet the social demands to perform within the norms of this community. These expected norms are shaped by several community aspects, such as cultural beliefs, ethical considerations, and moral positions. The workplace experiences are also where students start to shape and understand their own identity as a professional and their professional morality and ethics. With increasing industry demands for work-ready graduates (Archer & Davison, 2008; Lomax-Smith, Watson, & Webster, 2011), there needs to be consideration that 'work-readiness' includes professional identity and professional ethics. Identity development is strongly related to how a student engages with professional work-life (Reid, Dahlgren, Peticz, & Dahlgren, 2008). Perhaps not surprising then that increasingly values education, enhancing ethical knowledge and conduct, and professional identity development are being seen as important facets of student development (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011a; Herkert, 2000; Keown, Parker, & Tiakiwai, 2005; Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2011). However, students engaged in undergraduate studies, tend to hold narrow conceptualisations of professionalism (Grace & Trede, 2011). The literature argues that to have effective development of professional ethical awareness and practice, then explicit emphasis must be placed in the curriculum on the learning and development of professional identity and professional ethics (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011b; Trede, 2012).

METHODS

The aim of this research was to determine students' pre- and post-work placement understandings and experiences of professional ethics and workplace values as they embark on a science and engineering work placement.

Data was collected using online surveys, through LimeSurvey® software, and one-to-one, semi-structured, audio recorded interviews. Participants were surveyed one month prior to commencing work placement ($n = 31$, 26% response rate) and one month upon completion of the work placement ($n = 27$, 28% response rate). The survey instrument asked students to respond, using ordinal 10 point Likert scales (where 10 = strongly agree) to a number of statements. An invitation was made to take part in a 45 minute interview, which collected four self-volunteered participants, who were interviewed in the first week of work placement and two weeks after the placement was completed. Interviews were audio recorded and thematically analysed. This research has ethical approval granted by the human ethics committee at University of Waikato.

Gender distribution of participants were 58% male and 41% female (reflecting engineering, and to a lesser extent science, being male dominated) with 95% being aged between 19 and 22 years. Participants were predominantly European (66%), followed by New Zealand Maori (8%), Asian (12%), and other (14%). When the survey Likert data was subjected to the Cronbach's Alpha reliability test, the results indicated strong internal consistency with low variance (pre-placement $\alpha = 0.92$; $\bar{x}SD = 2.01$; post-placement $\alpha = 0.81$; $\bar{x}SD = 2.35$). A comparative demographic analysis of survey respondents to the sampling cohort indicates the respondents are representative of the sampling population.

RESULTS

Pre-Placement

Discussion of the pre-placement data was presented at a previous NZACE conference (Zegwaard & Campbell, 2013). Most significant findings of the pre-placement data were that students were not convinced that they had a sound understanding of their professional values (Likert 5.83), tended to believe that professional ethics were complex (Likert 6.73), were unsure if personal values would conflict with professional values (Likert 4.47), and were unsure if they could positively change the ethical behaviour of the workplace (Likert 5.93). Students thought they generally behaved ethically (Likert 7.94), however, were unsure if society had good values (Likert 5.10). Students did not think they struggled to determine the right ethical choice (Likert 3.42), however, when asked the same of others around them, students were less convinced (Likert 5.03).

Post-Placement

After their work placement, students felt that the placement had improved their understanding of professional ethics (pre-placement Likert 5.83; post-placement Likert 7.24; $p < .05$). Students believed their own ethical conduct during their placement had mostly reflected their personal values (Likert 8.26) and did not believe their professional values conflicted with their personal values (Likert 3.48). Pre-placement interview data suggested that students thought professional ethics were essentially personal ethics applied in a professional context, and when this statement was included in the post-placement survey, students agreed with this statement (Likert 7.52).

However, some views did not change after the placement. After the work placement, students did not think they struggled making the right ethical choice (Likert 3.42), however, thought others may struggle more, for example, other students (Likert 4.48), their colleagues (Likert 4.15), and 'others around them' (Likert 5.27). These views are similar to pre-placement views. Half of the students indicated that they observed, or were aware of, unethical behaviour in the workplace. Rather concerning, after the placement experience, students tended to be less inclined to speak up if they saw something unethical happening (pre-placement Likert 7.60; post-placement Likert 6.58; $p < .05$).

Students still believed they adhered to good values (Likert 7.65), however, their view of society around them generally having good values was unchanged (pre-placement Likert 5.10; post-placement Likert 5.38; $p > .25$). When asked post-placement if professional ethics was complex, students still agreed to the same level as before placement (pre-placement Likert 6.73; post-placement Likert 6.68; $p > .45$).

Despite students thinking they had mostly positively impact the workplace values (Likert 6.48), that they always made good ethical decisions (Likert 7.17), and that they believed the experience will result in them responding differently in the next workplace (Likert 6.70), students still held the same level of uncertainty on their ability to positively impact the values at the next workplace (pre-placement Likert 5.93; post-placement Likert 5.76; $p < .35$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Students who had undertaken work placements reported mostly positive experiences engaging with professional ethics and workplace values, including that they believed they had successfully and positively impacted workplace values. However, the data suggests that they had not yet fully appreciate the complex relationships between professional conduct and personal values.

Prior to placement students indicated that they were unsure whether they would positively impact the workplace values, however, after placement, students felt they had positively shaped practices in the workplace. It is, therefore, conflicting that students then held the same level of uncertainty about being able to positively impact the next workplace. This may be indicative of student lack of realisation of personal agency, that is, they did neither realise their agency during placement nor recognised their ability to be agentic in the next placement. Students holding a similar view after placement that professional ethics were complex support this idea of lack of realisation.

Interestingly, prior to their first work placement, students indicated that they would readily speak up if they saw unethical actions in the workplace, even if speaking up offended others; however, this readiness to speak up significantly declined after the work placement experience. This seems surprising, given students thought they had positive experiences. However, this decline may partially derive from uninformed, naïve, or idealistic views students held of workplaces which, when confronted with the socially complex nature and individual power differentials, created greater hesitancy to speak up. This concept here would tie into the previous ideas about the realisation (or lack therefore) of personal agency and their ability of personal agency.

The workplace experience did not change students' views of the lack of ethical capacity of those around them. Such a perception of oneself being morally and ethically better than others, is in contrast to the generally accepted view that individuals tend to judge themselves harder than others (Kirshenbaum, 2008). However, Trivers (2011) argues that in regards to moral status, individuals not only judge others more harshly, they are quicker to forgive themselves for moral indiscretions than others for the same offense. It may well be that students, having seen some unethical behaviours in the workplace, re-enforced their perception of others around as having a lower moral capacity because of knowledge of their peers activities, coupled with a greater readiness to forgive oneself rather than others. The challenge presented here to the teaching of ethics is that students may express inertia to learning, and quickly dismiss alternative and externally offered challenges to their own ethical positioning if they already believe they are ethically, and morally, superior to others.

These findings presented here highlight key considerations for the relationship between workplace experiences and student ethical development; however, there is still a gap in demonstrating the causal relationship between particular elements of workplace experiences, and student moral and ethical development. Thus, this paper also highlights the need for significant further research to better understand some of the complex development students undergo in regards to professional identity development, professional ethics awareness, and students' awareness of their ability to be agentic in the workplace.

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