

Teaching Ethics - threat or opportunity?

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ethics

- a. (after Greek τὰ ἠθικά). The science of morals; the department of study concerned with the principles of human duty.
- In narrower sense, with some qualifying word or phrase: a. The moral principles or system of a particular leader or school of thought.*

Teaching Ethics

Whilst we are all familiar with the need to fulfil the ethical requirements of research, we are not so used to giving serious consideration to the relationship between ethics and teaching.

However, it seems likely that this is an issue that the School of Law will be required to address in future years. Recently, legal education has been under the scrutiny of the Legal Education and Training Review (the review commenced in June 2011 and is now in its final stages). It is anticipated that one likely response to the review will be the compulsory introduction of ethics into the undergraduate qualifying law degree (QLD) programme.

A QLD is recognised as the first stage of training for those who hope or intend to practise law. The majority of our students follow this programme. Students can pursue a limited number of optional modules but must complete seven core modules, as determined by external regulators. It is not yet clear whether we might be required to teach ethics within these existing modules, or introduce ethics as an additional 'stand alone' module/half-module.

This potential development has received a mixed response from legal academics; some arguing that it is more appropriate to teach ethics subsequent to the degree, as a part of vocational training. Others are more positive and indeed some UK law schools already teach ethics as part of optional or compulsory modules. So what will our response be? What do we think about teaching ethics?

Threat?

Those who oppose the development have raised the following concerns:

- teaching ethics most likely means teaching *professional* legal ethics – this is not our concern
- a wide variety of students pursue law degrees; most will not go on to practise law
- problems with ethics in the profession cannot be solved in the context of the undergraduate law degree
- the lack of academics currently qualified to teach ethics
- where will additional resources come from?

threat

2. Painful pressure, oppression, compulsion; vexation, torment; affliction, distress, misery; danger, peril.

Opportunity?

Others have noted the following:

- teaching legal ethics need not mean just teaching a professional code
- it can equip students to critically assess professional codes
- it involves training students *how* to think about ethical issues, not *what* to think about them
- it can encourage a student's personal development
- it can help to prepare students for employment of any kind – not just legal practice
- teaching ethics need not be limited to law
- ethics can be taught across all subject disciplines

opportunity

1. a. As a mass noun: a time, condition, or set of circumstances permitting or favourable to a particular action or purpose.

What will our response be? What do we think about teaching ethics?

- Certainly we should neither dismiss nor diminish the opportunities that teaching ethics can offer, on the basis that we are not (just) training future professionals
- Whether or not we are required to do so by external regulators, it would be beneficial to consider the advantages and disadvantages of teaching ethics in the undergraduate law degree and (potentially) across other subject disciplines
- Some Universities are already teaching ethics across subject disciplines (see for example the University of Leeds' Inter-disciplinary Ethics Applied Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning 'IDEA CETL')
- There is potential for further exploring the link between receiving training in ethics and employability
- We need to be realistic in our expectations of positively influencing future behaviour. Note for example the outcomes of social psychologists Darley & Batson's (1973) 'Good Samaritan' experiment, which demonstrates the significant impact of context on human behaviour.
- Could teaching ethics compel us to carry out an 'ethical reevaluation' of our own teaching practices and techniques? Is this a threat or an opportunity?