

Business Ethics Training and Its Professional Applicability: Evidence from Students' Perceptions in the Dominican Republic

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Abstract – Prior studies emphasize the role of business ethics education in fostering ethical awareness and professional responsibility, while noting limitations in practical application. This study examines business students' perceptions of the ethical knowledge acquired at university and its relevance to professional practice. It addresses how students evaluate ethics content, teaching approaches, and professional applicability, hypothesizing an overall positive perception with identified pedagogical gaps. Using a quantitative, descriptive design, a structured questionnaire was administered to 209 undergraduate business students in the Dominican Republic. Results reveal strong familiarity with ethical concepts, high perceived professional relevance, positive faculty evaluation, and a need for more experiential, practice-oriented teaching strategies.

Keywords – Professional ethics, business education, student perception, university education, Dominican Republic.

1. Introduction

Within the framework of contemporary professional practice, ethics occupies a central place in university education, especially in disciplines associated with business, where decisions affect both organizations and society as a whole. Recent financial crises, corporate scandals, and ethical dilemmas emerging from digital transformation and globalization have highlighted the need to strengthen the ethical training of future professionals [1]. In this regard, some studies have highlighted the need to integrate a solid ethics education capable of influencing responsible decision-making throughout a professional career [2], [3]. However, the effectiveness of business ethics training programs remains a matter of debate, especially when assessed from the perspective of students themselves [4], as has been observed in other dimensions such as sustainability [5], [6] and about other university aspects [7], [8]. This research is part of this context because it explores how business students understand and value the ethical knowledge acquired during their university education.

Despite the growing interest in studies on professional ethics at the university level, there remains a paucity of empirical work focused on student perceptions [9], especially within the Latin American and Caribbean context [10]. Much of the existing literature focuses on normative approaches or curricular frameworks, but there is limited research that directly links ethics teaching with self-perceptions of ethical preparedness for professional life [11]. This gap is particularly relevant considering that student perceptions constitute a key indicator for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and for improving pedagogical strategies in values education [12]. In other words, university ethics education must transcend the theoretical to develop critical awareness and deliberative capacity, which are especially useful when faced with complex dilemmas [13].

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In the Dominican Republic, the inclusion of professional ethics courses in university curricula is relatively recent and responds to the need to align academic training with the country's social and business challenges. The Pontifical Catholic Mother and Teacher University - *Pontificia Universidad Católica, Madre y Maestra* - (PUCMM) has been a pioneer in this regard, incorporating the structured subject of "Business Ethics" into the curriculum of business programs, offering a space for reflection and critical discussion around the principles of responsibility, justice, integrity, and transparency. In a country where indicators of institutional trust and perceptions of corruption represent persistent challenges [14], ethics training takes on strategic value for building a professional network committed to the common good. Furthermore, Dominican academic culture is still consolidating its research base on ethical competencies, making studies such as this one significant contribution to guiding curricular reforms and teaching strategies. In this context, the relevance of this work lies, therefore, both in its educational dimension and in its potential impact on the construction of a more ethical and sustainable professional culture.

The main objective of this research is to analyse the perceptions of Business Administration students at PUCMM regarding the ethical knowledge acquired during the "Business Ethics" course, as well as its relevance to future professional practice. Using a quantitative-descriptive approach, a validated questionnaire was administered to a sample of 209 students, allowing to examine the frequency with which ethical issues are addressed, the perception of personal preparation, and the evaluation of faculty commitment to ethics training. Through this analysis, we seek to provide empirical evidence on the effectiveness of professional ethics programs from the student perspective, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement. This study also lays the groundwork for future research that delves deeper into the relationship between ethics, higher education, and professional performance in Latin American contexts.

2. Literature Review

The teaching of ethics in business programs has generated increased interest in recent decades. Thus, various studies have highlighted the need to integrate ethical competencies into higher education as a means of training professionals capable of facing the ethical challenges inherent in management practice [15], [16]. This need responds to social pressures on corporate conduct following successive financial and governance scandals, which reveal structural failures in the internalization of ethical principles by business school graduates [17].

The literature shows consensus that university ethics education should not be limited to the transmission of normative content, as it must promote the development of critical skills, moral judgment, and a deliberative disposition in students [13]. In this sense, studies such as that by [15] highlight that both individual attitudes toward ethics and the institutional ethical climate significantly influence the acquisition of ethical competencies. Thus, using an approach based on formal and informal socialization, these authors argue that interactions with faculty perceived as ethical leaders and with an institution committed to ethical values enhance students' internalization of these principles. This view is aligned with European Higher Education frameworks, which promote education for responsible citizenship and sustainable development [18].

From a methodological perspective, the importance of employing active and constructivist pedagogical approaches in teaching ethics has been highlighted. A case study at a Scandinavian university demonstrates that constructivist methodologies, such as project-based learning, role-playing, and case-based learning, are effective in stimulating moral reflection, critical thinking, and the practical application of ethical knowledge [19]. Likewise, students' active participation in the construction of their ethical knowledge allows it to be articulated with their previous experiences and become a reference for their future conduct.

However, the integration of ethics into curricula is not without challenges. There is a crisis of legitimacy surrounding behavioural courses, including ethics, in business schools [20]. Although employers increasingly value soft skills, such as ethical responsibility and leadership skills, students tend to perceive these subjects as marginal or of little practical use, favouring technical subjects [21]. This mismatch between market expectations and student perceptions may be due to the way ethics is positioned within the curriculum, it disconnects from real-life experiences, or the lack of transversal integration of ethical principles into disciplinary training [15], [20].

Another relevant approach is provided by [17], who distinguishes between the "use value" and "exchange value" of business ethics. The former refers to the immediate applicability of ethical knowledge in the workplace, while the latter refers to its value as symbolic capital in terms of employability and professional reputation. Their research in an Asian context demonstrates that, although students do not initially perceive ethics training as directly useful, over time they recognize its positive impact on decision-making, responsible leadership, and professional performance.

Regarding employability, [16] provides empirical evidence on the influence of business ethics training on the acquisition of key competencies for the job placement of Human Resources graduates. His study indicates that ethical knowledge strengthens skills, decision-making, and the ability to manage organizational conflicts. Furthermore, it shows that ethics also has a strategic function, as it contributes to the legitimization of professionals among their stakeholders.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted at the PUCMM university, located in Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic. This institution was chosen as the context for the analysis for two main reasons. First, it is one of the private universities with the highest enrolment in business programs. Second, its academic curriculum includes a specific course on “Business Ethics”, which is required for all business programs. This allows for a systematic and comparative evaluation of students’ perceptions of the ethical knowledge acquired while taking this course. This institutional context is especially relevant for assessing the effectiveness of professional ethics training programs from a situated perspective.

The data collection instrument was designed based on a prior theoretical and empirical review, considering relevant studies in the field of university ethics training [22], [23], [24]. A 12-item questionnaire was initially developed and reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the university’s Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences. As a result of this validation process, the wording of some items was adjusted and one was discarded, resulting in a final version consisting of 11 structured questions. The questionnaire includes six dichotomous (yes/no) questions, five items with frequency scales (Likert-type with four options), and four open-ended questions. The variety of formats seeks to capture both quantitative and qualitative data on the degree of conceptual appropriation, practical applicability, and overall assessment of ethical content.

The study population consisted of undergraduate students at PUCMM enrolled in the “Business Ethics” course during the May–August 2024 semester. Six class groups were selected, taught by three different professors, ensuring uniformity of curriculum content while respecting the methodological specifics of each instructor. All students included were taking the course for the first time. The total sample consisted of 209 students, distributed across four in-person groups and two virtual groups (videoconferences via Microsoft Teams and the Moodle platform).

The questionnaire was administered online, using Google Forms as the digital platform, allowing synchronous access via mobile devices. The estimated time to complete the questionnaire was 20 minutes, and it was administered during the third week of July 2024.

IBM SPSS version 24, a statistical software recognized for its wide use in academic and scientific research, was used to analyse the collected data. In the first stage, a descriptive analysis of frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency was carried out for the quantitative variables. Subsequently, the reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient, obtaining a moderate value of 0.682 for items with multiple response options and a value of 0.648 for the entire questionnaire, which is considered acceptable for exploratory studies in the social sciences [25]. The processing of the open-ended questions also allowed for thematic coding of the qualitative responses, identifying patterns in the perceptions, assessments, and proposals made by the participants.

4. Results

The research clearly identified students’ perceptions of the ethical training received in the “Business Ethics” course and its professional applicability. The data collected showed a high level of familiarity with the basic concepts of professional ethics and a positive assessment of the usefulness of this knowledge in the workplace. First, theoretical knowledge of the fundamental concepts of ethics was assessed. As shown in Table 1, 97% of participants (n=203) reported being familiar with the concept of professional ethics, while only 3% (n=6) were unfamiliar with it. Regarding the concept of ethical dilemma, 90% (n=189) responded affirmatively, and 10% (n=20) indicated they were unfamiliar with it.

Table 1. Knowledge of fundamental ethical concepts

Concept	Yes	No	Total
Professional ethics	203 (97%)	6 (3%)	209
Ethical dilemma	189 (90%)	20 (10%)	209

Subsequently, the teaching strategies used during the course were analysed. Students responded to the frequency with which different methodologies were applied. Table 2 summarizes the results according to four categories: in most classes, in some classes, in few classes, and in no classes. A predominance of analytical methodologies (such as dilemma analysis and identification of unethical behaviours) was observed, while more participatory and experiential strategies (such as simulations) were applied less frequently.

Table 2. Frequency of use of teaching strategies in class

Teaching strategy	Most classes	Some classes	Few classes	No class
Analysis of real ethical dilemmas	44 (21%)	102 (49%)	44 (21%)	19 (9%)
Study of contemporary ethical theorists	49 (24%)	88 (42%)	43 (21%)	29 (13%)
Identification of unethical behaviors	69 (33%)	84 (40%)	37 (18%)	19 (9%)
Use of simulations and role-play	25 (12%)	55 (26%)	63 (30%)	66 (32%)
Review of ethical literature (classical and contemporary)	57 (27%)	66 (32%)	58 (28%)	28 (13%)

Regarding students' perceptions of the impact of the ethics training they received on their professional preparation, the results were highly positive. As detailed in Table 3, 79% of participants considered themselves prepared to practice their future profession based on the ethical principles they had learned, while the remaining 21% expressed not feeling fully prepared. Students' perceptions of teachers' interest in helping students gain a deeper understanding of ethical issues were also assessed. The results in Table 3 show that 79% of respondents also considered their teachers did show such interest, reflecting a positive assessment of teachers' attitudes toward values training. Regarding the value attributed to the subject in terms of its social and professional impact, the responses were virtually unanimous, as 100% of students recognized the subject as relevant to ensuring respect for users of professional services. Finally, an assessment was made of whether the course had promoted a better understanding of the role of the responsible and conscientious professional in society, and 92% of students considered it had.

Table 3. Student perception

Item	Yes/No	%
Do you feel prepared to pursue your career based on the ethical principles you have learned?	Yes	79%
	No	21%
Did you perceive that your teacher showed interest in helping you deeply understand ethics?	Yes	79%
	No	21%
Is there a value attributed to the subject in terms of social and professional impact?	Yes	100%
	No	0%
Did the course help you better understand the ethical professional role in society?	Yes	92%
	No	8%

To delve deeper into the reasons why those who felt unprepared or did not consider ethical deliberation relevant were asked, qualitative responses were analysed. Among the recurring observations were the need to incorporate more specific cases related to different business areas (such as marketing, accounting, or finance), the request for classroom discussions on current dilemmas in the Dominican context, and an interest in receiving training on professional-specific codes of ethics. It was also suggested that the use of simulations and practical activities be increased to better prepare for real-life scenarios.

5. Discussion

The results of this study show that business students in the Dominican Republic view the ethical knowledge acquired through the "Business Ethics" course highly positively, highlighting its relevance both for professional decision-making and for strengthening personal values. This perception, reflected in the high proportion of affirmative responses regarding knowledge of key concepts, practical usefulness, and appreciation of the teaching role, is directly related to the findings of studies that have analysed the educational impact of business ethics in higher education [15], [17].

First, students' conceptual understanding is aligned with previous research indicating that explicit teaching of ethical principles increases moral sensitivity and the ability to identify dilemmas in professional contexts [26], [27]. In the present study, more than 90% of students indicated familiarity with the concepts of professional ethics and ethical dilemmas, suggesting that, although some authors have argued that moral foundations are formed before higher education [28], university education does strengthen these foundations and promote an ethical approach to future decision-making.

Regarding the pedagogical approach, the results show that the methodologies employed focused mainly on case analysis, literature review, and ethical debates, while more experiential strategies such as role-playing were significantly less common. This trend has already been noted by authors such as [19], who warn that ethics teaching tends to adopt more traditional formats, hindering the development of applied ethical competencies. However, experiences such as [29] *Giving Voice to Values* approach have shown that active learning through simulations increases students' ability to act ethically in real-life situations. Therefore, the current results of this study confirm that, although ethical competencies are being developed, there is significant room for improvement in the implementation of practical methodologies that allow for behavioural appropriation of the content.

Another important dimension is the perception of applicability. Ninety percent of students believe that ethical knowledge prepares them for their professional future, which is consistent with what [17] describes, who distinguishes between use value (the immediate usefulness of knowledge in the training context) and exchange value (the transfer of this learning to work contexts). In the Dominican case, this perception suggests an instrumental appreciation of ethical learning, understood as a personal competitive advantage that facilitates fairer, more transparent, and more professional decision-making in the workplace.

Likewise, the importance of faculty was highly valued: nine out of ten students stated that their professors showed genuine interest in their understanding of ethical principles. This assessment is highly relevant, as studies have indicated that teachers' commitment to ethics translates into better internalization of moral values and principles by students [20]. However, other studies such as that by [16] warn that the effectiveness of ethics teaching also depends on the institutional context and the coherence of values between what is taught and what is practiced at the university. In this sense, Dominican institutions must ensure alignment between the curriculum, institutional values, and teaching behaviour.

Finally, the finding that 100% of respondents believe that professional ethics guarantees respect for user rights, as well as the 96% who value ethical deliberation, highlights the idea that ethics training is not limited to learning standards, as it also promotes an orientation toward justice and social responsibility. This point coincides with what was pointed out by [15], who highlight that the most effective ethics training programs are those that integrate the axiological dimension and critical reflection in their pedagogical design.

6. Conclusion

The study found that business students in the Dominican Republic perceive they have acquired relevant ethical knowledge applicable to their future professional lives. It identified a high level of familiarity with fundamental ethical concepts, a positive assessment of the faculty, and a perception of the practical usefulness of the content. It also revealed a preference for analytical methodologies and limited use of experiential strategies.

This study contributes relevant elements to the theoretical framework on ethics education in business studies, particularly in Latin American contexts underrepresented in the scientific literature. One of the main theoretical contributions is the observation that students' perception of ethical utility is also constructed based on the affective and contextual integration of learning.

This idea reinforces the notion that the development of ethical competence is both a cognitive and experiential process and must be understood through a critical and transformative pedagogy.

Furthermore, the study's results allow to broaden the approach from a "prescriptive ethics" approach to a "deliberative ethics" approach, in which students develop their moral agency by questioning cases and interacting with divergent perspectives.

Finally, the research suggests that theoretical frameworks on business ethics need to be updated to incorporate the specific demands of developing countries, where the tensions between economic growth, social justice, and transparency are particularly acute. Thus, the study is positioned as a starting point for rethinking ethical models that integrate cultural, institutional and social elements specific to the Dominican context.

From a practical perspective, the results of this study offer a series of concrete guidelines for universities interested in strengthening the ethical training of their business students. First, it highlights the need to adopt student-centred teaching strategies that promote active learning, the resolution of real-life dilemmas, the simulation of scenarios, and the use of methodologies such as ethical debate or problem-based learning (PBL). These techniques improve understanding and the willingness to act ethically in professional practice.

Furthermore, it is recommended to foster a coherent institutional culture, in which ethics is a cross-cutting value reflected in management, administrative processes, teacher evaluation, and community relations. This requires ongoing faculty training in both ethical content and teaching methodologies that promote critical judgment, empathy, and reflective decision-making.

Another implication is the importance of reviewing curricula from a competency-based approach, incorporating assessment indicators that allow for evaluating students' level of ethical internalization beyond theoretical knowledge. This would involve, for example, designing rubrics that assess moral reasoning, ethical argumentation, and the ability to resolve complex dilemmas.

Furthermore, universities should build bridges between academia and the professional environment by developing supervised internship programs or ethics clinics where students can apply their knowledge in real-life situations, thus strengthening the link between theory and action.

At a personal level, for the university that served as the setting for this study, the results should translate into a strategic opportunity to consolidate its educational offering based on ethics.

In curricular terms, it is suggested that the inclusion of ethical content beyond the specific subject of “Business Ethics” be expanded, promoting its cross-curricular inclusion in other subjects such as marketing, administration, finance, and accounting. This can be done through seminars, modules, or extracurricular activities coordinated across departments, which would reinforce an integrated view of professional practice.

Additionally, there is a need to design a teacher training plan in ethical competencies, both for course instructors and the rest of the academic staff, to maintain institutional coherence in educational messages and avoid dissonances between discourse and practice. It is also necessary to foster spaces for student dialogue on professional ethics, through clubs, forums, or debates, which would contribute to active appropriation of the content.

Finally, given that the results reflect a high level of ethical awareness among students, the university could position itself as a national benchmark in professional ethics training by integrating social responsibility indicators into its educational model, promoting research on applied ethics, and strengthening alliances with companies committed to ethical principles.

Among the study’s main limitations are the use of a single data collection instrument (a structured questionnaire) and the concentration of the sample in a single university, which limits the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, the study worked exclusively with declarative data, which prevents verification of the translation of ethical attitudes into observable behaviours in real-life contexts. Future research should include longitudinal studies to assess the impact of ethics training throughout graduates’ professional careers, incorporating mixed-method approaches that combine observation and in-depth interviews, as well as comparative analyses across different institutions and regions of the country. In addition, the role of organizational culture as a facilitator or barrier to the effective application of ethical values acquired at university should be further examined.

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