

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE ON ETHICS MANAGEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM OF ROMANIA

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Abstract:

The article presents the critical perspectives of students from higher education system of Romania on the ethics and ethics management of institutions where they study. Their point of view reflects also their experience but also the image of universities in the common perception. The methodology used a questionnaire on a number of 113 students from more than ten cities and more institutions, from private and public system also. This study was conducted in parallel with another research made on managers' perspective in order to bring equilibrium and a more realistic image of the ethics management in Romania's universities. Results reflect the lacks in this system and the poor image in education sector and create numerous opportunities for an improvement by implementing the tools of ethics management. There is an important gap between the two perspectives, both subjective of course, but this reality addresses a lot of questions to debate on, for a considerable change in the way managers use ethics management as a powerful tool to increase their competitiveness on education market.

Keywords: ethics management, higher education system, university, Romania

Introduction

The article approaches a difficult subject, because ethics is a delicate issue especially when using a questionnaire as a research method. The paper tries to understand the perspective of students from higher education system of Romania regarding ethics and implementation of ethics management in institutions where they study. Because the questions addressed were very sensitive, I preferred using an online survey in order to increase the chances of honest responses.

Ethics is a subject we read about in a lot of works from national and international literature, because it preoccupies people that want to create a better society with a greater transparency and competitiveness, leading also to an increase of investments.

Sims (1994, p. 5) appreciates that "ethics refers to the rules or principles that define right and wrong conduct", but at the same time, the author states that there are also a lot of dilemmas and questions nowadays for which we don't

have a right answer, but we can make some judgments according to some ethical guidelines.

In a tight connection with what Sims stated, Barbu and Craciun (2012, p. 59) also appreciate that "human action may fall within one of three areas, which differ in the amount of explicit control existing at that level: the law, the ethics and the free choice of each individual."

Ethical decisions wouldn't be so crucial if they hadn't consequences like any other decisions we make. Tomescu et al. (2006, p. 81) consider that "moral consequences can be judged through the potential damages brought to the beneficiaries of the decision."

Similar studies on students' perception on ethics were "Management Student's Attitudes towards Business Ethics", where authors Bageac, Furrer et al. (2011) made a comparative research on France and Romania. Their conclusion was that Romanian students are more focused on materialist values and Machiavellianism, because of the living conditions they were used before 1989

and French students more on Social Darwinism because of the elitist and selective education system in France. Another article approaching a similar subject was "Understanding Ethics: A Study on Perception of Management Students" of Nagpal and Das (2013). The article revealed the factors taken into account by students and also the differences in their perceptions when they graduate high schools and go to a college.

Methodology

The research is based on a questionnaire conducted on a number of 113 students from the most important university centers in Romania, both from private and public sector. The research was realized between May 29 and July 21 2014 and was transmitted to the potential respondents online, by social platforms and e-mail. Online form of the survey was done with Google Form, because this type of online questionnaire permitted respondents to remain anonymous and answer with higher honesty than in the case of printed and face to face questionnaires.

Comparative to another research I conducted in parallel on managers' perception, this research was more difficult, because students haven't reacted so quickly and were not very eager to answer the 5-6 minutes questionnaire. So, limits and obstacles were more important, even if they were more direct in their answers when they finally decided to fill the form.

The questionnaire had also an open question to which they should have provide an answer regarding their general opinion on ethics management in the institutions where they study. This question was optional and my first thought was that I won't get any answers, but, surprisingly, more than 20% of the respondents offered a detailed answer to the question, providing useful data on the whole picture they have in mind when thinking about ethics in universities.

The most important strength of the method was the online form, because confidentiality was so guaranteed for them and they weren't afraid to tell what they really think.

Results of research

The research has two main hypotheses that would be or not confirmed after the analysis of data with SPSS software version 21:

Hypothesis no 1:

Codes of ethics, ethical committees or other means of communicating ethics to students are not well disseminated within the institutions where students study.

Hypothesis no 2:

Even if students recognize the important role played by professors regarding ethics, they also don't trust them enough to tell about ethical problems they are aware of or to ask for an advice.

The structure of the sample was the following:

- according to their age: 18-25 years (89.4%), 26-35 years (7.1%), 36-45 years (1.8%) and more than 45 years (1.8%).
- according to their gender: 77% of the respondents were women (being more open to the survey) and 23% were men.
- according to their studies: 76% of them are following studies financed by government and just 23% of them are following paid studies. This also shows a higher interest in offering responses to the survey of those that follow the budgeted studies.

The first hypothesis can be analyzed with the help of some questions addressed in the questionnaire, related to ethical codes and committees, and also to the frequency students are being communicated ethical aspects.

Regarding the ethical code in the institutions where they study, students had to answer if they consider codes of ethics necessary, if they know if there are codes of ethics there and also if they know where to consult them.

We use crosstabs analysis in SPSS version 21 to show how students think

about these codes of ethics and also reflect a tendency (table 1):

Table 1
Crosstabs analysis related to students' perception on codes of ethics

<i>Do you think there is a code of ethics in your university?</i>	<i>Do you think codes of ethics are necessary?</i>		
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>I don't know</i>
<i>Yes 45%</i>	96.1%	-	3.9%
<i>No 6%</i>	85.7%	-	14.3%
<i>I don't know 49%</i>	81.8%	1.8%	16.4%
<i>Total</i>	88.5%	0.9%	10.6%

We can see that most of the respondents are not aware of the existence of codes of ethics, this meaning in fact a bad dissemination and a lack of transparency in the institutions where they study. This issue represents a problem of ethics management and should lead to some valuable conclusions for managers involved.

Even they are not aware of the ethical codes and probably don't know what they refer to, more than 80% of the students, no matter they knew or didn't know about codes of ethics, consider them important and necessary for universities.

When asked precisely if they know where to look for the code of ethics in the university they study, 80% of the respondents said no and just 20% said yes. This is a worrying percent, a very high level and this fact cannot be seen as a fault of students, but a real and serious flaw in the management of higher education system.

It is not enough to have a code of ethics and upload it on the web site somewhere there, it also has to be communicated, talked about, highlighted and these can be done with proper use of ethics management, in a structured and organized way, not random.

The situation was similar when students were asked about the existence of ethical committees. Just 17% of the respondents answered they were aware of the existence of these committees and the rest of them, more than 80%, said they don't know about these.

Another issue I addressed to the respondents was related to the frequency of the ethical aspects approached by professors or their tutors. Just 11% of the students said they discuss often these aspects, but most of them – 56% said they rarely discuss these problems. Another important percent was that of those who said that they never discuss ethical aspects (33%). If we sum the percentages of those who rarely discuss or never discussed, we notice that almost 90% of the students don't have frequent discussions about ethics.

Obviously, there may be a connection between this lack of transparency and unethical behavior of some students. 94% of the respondents said they make copies of the books they need even if this is against intellectual property rights, 47% of them offered at least once small gifts to the professors hoping for a benefit, 45% of them recognized they copied the solved subjects from their colleagues, 32% admitted they plagiarized paragraphs from different books. Examples are more and these percentages are very high. Of course we cannot expand this research to the entire community of students, but it certainly offers an image of what their confusion about what is or is not ethical.

Taking into account all these data, we can conclude that "Codes of ethics, ethical committees or other means of communicating ethics to students are not well disseminated within the institutions where students study", thus validating the first hypothesis.

Students are aware of the role that professors should play when coming to ethical aspects and developing ethics among them, because more than 75% of them partially and totally agreed with this

statement. Opinions of students regarding to their professors can be highlighted in table 2, with the help of descriptive statistics.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics regarding ethics in universities

	Mean	Standard deviation
<i>Professors play a very important role in developing ethics among students</i>	4.21	1.073
<i>Students trust their professors to ask them for advices when facing with ethical dilemmas</i>	2.81	1.295

Students offered varied responses, fact also shown by the standard deviation higher than 1, but this can be explained by the different characteristics of respondents and their heterogeneity. The mean of 4.21 on a scale from 1 (total disagreement) to 5 (total agreement) shows us that students understand the role played by professors in developing ethics among them.

Even if they are aware of this fact, students do not trust them to ask for an advice when facing ethical dilemmas. The mean and the standard deviation show here a higher heterogeneity, percentages revealing also this reality: 20% were indifferent (a high percentage), 37% agreed and totally agreed with the trust and 43% disagreed. So, there are more students that do not trust or they are not willing or show no interest in asking these kinds of advices.

Trying to reveal what the causes may be, I also analyzed some aspects that students considered very important: evaluation, language, pressures. For example, 56% of the respondents have the opinion (it doesn't matter if this is real or not, the image is bad, implying a need for serious measures) that professors evaluate them according to personal preferences. Of course, we cannot judge professors function to this perception, but we can draw the conclusion that there is a serious problem of image in higher education system of Romania and this should be more analyzed and establishing

some measures. There is a tight connection between image and competitiveness and I do not refer here just to competitiveness on education market, but also further on the labor market.

Language used by professors to students is seen as cold and superior by most of the respondents, 51% of them having this image. So, we can understand why students are not so willing to ask them for advices in ethical matters. Language is an important tool that connects people. It is natural for professors to adopt an academic language, but it is also necessary for them to adjust it to the students. In fact, higher education system offers services to students, so the student is the most important ring. The students revealed also an important problem in language used by secretary in relation with them. 52% of the respondents said that the language used by secretary is slightly offensive and aggressive. And this is a real problem that should be better managed by managers in higher education system.

Another problem not just immoral but also illegal is that of bribe in the system. 48% of the students said that bribe is not a rare phenomenon. We cannot conclude that 48% of them bribed someone, but certainly they have this image because they heard someone bribed and had some advantages. We cannot accuse someone of bribery but definitely, we can analyze the image. Image means power

and a system with a poor image is not worth too much on a competitive market in a competitive globalized world.

At the question regarding pressures made by professors on students to buy their books, 61% of the respondents agreed with this fact, revealing another ethical matter in universities. Also, about 51% of students said they buy books because of pressures or of the hope they will get higher grades at their exams.

Summing all these data, we can conclude that hypothesis no. 2 is also validated, because students do not have trust in their professors when facing with ethical dilemmas, even if they know they should play and some play an important role in developing ethics among students.

The causes are numerous, starting from the corrupt professors or the image of higher education system in Romania among students at least: bribe, corruption, pressures, wrong evaluations, personal preferences and a cold language or sometimes even aggressive and offensive.

The last question was an open one, leaving the respondents the freedom to write what they really think of the subject. Most of them mentioned nepotism as a real problem, employment of less qualified professors, bribe, mentality, some behavioral deviations, the need for proper sanctions and supervising mechanism, the need for ethical training and lectures, a proper dissemination of ethical matters, a proper psychological evaluation. As Cooke and Ryan (1988, p. 28) said, "Ethics training is important in the preparation of current or future managers". Some of them also mentioned a connection between professors' salaries and the gifts or bribe they receive.

Conclusions

This research was made in parallel with the research on managers that hasn't revealed many problems, even if the

questions were similar. My objective was to bring the equilibrium here and highlight that we can change our paradigm and at least accept that higher education systems in Romania suffers from a bad image among the community and especially students. I focused my research on ethical aspects, not qualifications of professors or the facilities in the universities. The researched revealed the problems in ethics management of these institutions, regarding a poor dissemination and communication of codes of ethics. Most of the students do not know where to study these codes, they do not know if they even exist and one of their suggestions at the open question was that of distributing these codes to all students and professors. Students do not trust their professors because they have a bad image on a great part of them: professors receiving bribe and gifts because of their salaries, professors employed on other criteria then qualifications and so on. These are valuable data if we analyze them and take some measures, we as managers, we as professors. Some of the measures that can be taken are an often revising of ethical codes, a proper communication, introducing some lectures or ethical trainings in universities for students and professors, a box for anonymous suggestions or complaints, implementation of procedures for whistle-blowers and other instruments met in ethics management. Ethics management should not be seen as a fancy word, but as an important mechanism to increase your competitiveness on the global market of educational services. This idea is best described by Payne (1988, p. 273): "Educators in colleges of business need to look beyond textbooks, lectures, and even ethics cases, however, to examine their own educational philosophy concerning the introduction of values and ethics topics into business courses".

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