# (UN) ETHICAL PRACTICES AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN UNIVERSITIES: ACADEMIC LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS

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7500 words

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we report on the qualitative component of a study that explored middle level academic leaders' experiences of (un)ethical practices and ethical dilemmas in their daily work. An electronic survey was distributed to academic leaders from universities across three Australian states. There are three major findings in this study. First, the messy context of universities is providing a fertile ground for ethical dilemmas to flourish. Second, the two main categories of unethical practices identified by participants were academic dishonesty and inappropriate behaviour towards staff and students. Third, the ethical dilemmas that emerged focused on the academic leaders' strong sense of professional ethics that were in conflict with an ethic of care, supervisors' directives, and the rules and policies of the organisation.

## INTRODUCTION

> *I believe that much of my position's work requires me to act ethically, in dealing with matters related to students, staff and in teaching and research. I see it as part of my knowledge and skills to be informed about being ethical and to be alert for occasions when this might be challenged.* (Academic leader)

The quote above comes from a participant in a study that focused on ethical dilemmas faced by middle level academic leaders, those leaders who occupy a course coordination role, in higher education institutions. In this study, 174 course coordinators across three universities in three Australian states completed an electronic survey that explored this topic. In this paper we investigate responses to open ended questions on the electronic survey that asked

academic leaders to (1) provide comments about the extent to which they have observed ethical practices and experienced dilemmas in their working environment and (2) to describe an ethical dilemma they faced and how they resolved it.

The paper begins by reviewing some of the salient literature in the field. This literature review has three components. The first provides some background on the recent changes in the university context and the impact of these changes on the work practices of academics and academic leaders. The second component of the literature review explores some of the research on the different types of unethical conduct in universities. The final component of the literature review provides a discussion of theoretical approaches that are useful for understanding ethical decision making.

## ETHICS IN THE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

Ethics is the 'study of proper thought and conduct' (Hosmer 1987: 91). Ethicists are concerned with what we ought to do and how we ought to behave. They ask questions about what is right and what is wrong (Ciulla 2006). Ethicist, Peter Singer (1994: 4), says that ethics can be understood as a 'set of rules, principles or ways of thinking that guide, or claim authority to guide, the actions of a particular group'.  Ethics is also about relationships and how we should interact and live with others (Freakley & Burgh 2000).

In recent times, there has been heightened media and public awareness of unethical behaviours in higher education institutions such as universities. Examples include plagiarism by staff and students, various forms of cheating, sexual harassment by staff and students in and out of the classroom, misuse of power, exchanging sexual activities for grades, and accepting money or gifts for grades (Ashford & Davis 2006; Robie & Keeping 2004). Hanson (2009: 2) goes as far as saying that, 'in higher education ... we face a decade in which

institutional integrity and legitimacy is under fire... [it] is certainly "the worst of times" both economically and ethically for our nation'. Although he is referring to the United States, the same could be said of other countries facing similarly uncertain times. Many would agree with Margetson's assessment (1997: 22) that the changed climate of universities is 'inimical to ethical quality and conflicts with academic work'.

The higher education climate that Margetson (1997) refers to is one that has undergone major reform and restructuring in line with managerial practices. In universities, these practices have included the adoption of private sector practices with a strong focus on outcomes, key performance indicators, monitoring and measurement, and tighter 'efficiency' and accountability regimes. Performance indicators have been used to compare universities against each other, with those amongst the highest rankings receiving the most funding. Commentators (Currie & Newson 1998; Currie & Vidovich 1998; Macfarlane 2009) have referred to increasing competition where universities compete for domestic and international students and where academics compete for shrinking research funding and publication outlets. There has been a commodification of universities, with education being marketed as a product to be bought and sold. More and more staff are being employed on casual and short-term contracts, being considered as disposable assets by university management. This management climate is placing universities in danger of 'becom[ing] detached from a moral perspective' (Pring in Fitzmaurice 2008: 341).

These system-wide changes have increased the powers of executive leadership, placing control of universities in the hands of senior managers while directing control away from academics (Doyle 1995 in Meek & Wood 1997)). Over a decade ago, Currie and Vidovich (1998) found this to be the case, with the majority of academics in their study in Australia and the United States claiming they were consulted less and less in major decisions. The

academics noted that power was centralised 'in the hands of a few senior managers' (1998: 153), including vice-chancellors and deputy and pro vice-chancellors. Currie and Vidovich found that the impact of managerialism was the 'micromanagement of academic work' (1998: 169), whereby academics lost both autonomy and direction. Given the continuing drift towards enhanced managerialism across the past decade, it is likely that such situations are even more evident today.

A further consequence of managerialism has been the 'erosion of ethical standards' (Samier 2008: 3). This erosion derives from the strong focus on 'bureaucratic' rather than 'moral' accountability. Samier, citing Menzel (1999),  maintains that the current climate has created 'morally mute managers' who are neither moral nor immoral but who find themselves 'seduced by a sense of duty as competent purveyors of neutral information' (Menzel in Samier 2008: 3). She discusses the 'passive evil' that is practised by managers when they fail to respond to the everyday unethical behaviour of others. Unethical practice is also viewed as leaders who fail to support others who question unethical practices that take place within their organisation (Gottlieb & Sanzgiri 1996). Alternatively, unethical conduct by leaders is said to occur when they exert pressure on staff to act in unethical ways (Campbell 2003; Helton & Ray 2005). For instance, in the schooling context, school psychologists in Jacob-Timm's (1999) study considered a superior's direction to conduct 'inadequate assessment' or limit information to parents to be contrary to their beliefs about what was in the best interests of students (Helton & Ray 2005).  What this short review of the literature suggests is that changing contexts in universities have created a 'climate' for matters of ethics to be more overt and more contested.

**EMERGENCE OF ETHICAL DILEMMAS**

Ethical dilemmas can be defined as decisions 'that require a choice among competing sets of principles, often in complex and value laden contexts' (Ehrich, Cranston & Kimber 2005: 137). Their emergence is unsurprising given the pressures and complexities of working within modern organisations (Whitton 1998). Universities are complex, pressured environments where academic leaders are faced with competing tensions and pressures when making decisions that affect diverse stakeholders such as students, colleagues, the local community, employers and corporate partners. Cerych et al. (in Meek & Wood 1997: 2) identify examples of tensions within higher education:

> ... between the requirements of excellence and of egalitarianism; between the structure and size of individual demand for higher education and of labour market requirements; between the aspirations and interests of the different groups involved in higher education; and between the aspirations and expectations of individuals and the prevailing socio-economic constraints in terms of availability of resources, academic attitudes, institutional hierarchies, established cultural and social value structures.

There is a growing body of work that has explored ethical challenges facing academics (Fitzmaurice 2008; Robie & Keeping 2004; Robertson & Grant 1982; Strom-Gottfried & Aprix 2006). For example, Strom-Gottfried and D'Aprix (2006) identified four categories of dilemmas that are likely to arise for academic staff in universities within their research, teaching, and service duties. These include authorship credit in research, conflicts of interest, dealing with underperforming staff, and a student's right to privacy. Robertson and Grant (1982) identified a number of dilemmas faced by academics in higher education. These include balancing encouragement and support with rigorous evaluation of students, the

degree of neutrality in teaching versus indoctrination, and conflicts between the time demands of research and demands of teaching.

Fitzmaurice (2008) argues that teaching in universities provides opportunities for ethical dilemmas to arise as judgements are required in complex situations where there are no simple solutions. Indeed, our own research with 174 academics across three Australian universities found that two-thirds had experienced or observed ethical dilemmas indicating that such dilemmas are reasonably common (Cranston, Ehrich, Kimber & Starr, 2012). Yet, according to Wilson (1982), ethical issues in research tend to be given a great deal of attention, via specially established committees that oversee research conduct, in contrast to teaching in universities ,where ethical issues may not be raised. He argues that ethical questions in teaching need to be placed on the agenda so that the best judgements can be made to serve students.

In the next section of the paper we consider three ethical perspectives that are likely considerations in determining the way in which academic leaders make ethical decisions. These are: professional ethics, an ethic of care and institutional ethics.

**Professional Ethics**

Professional ethics 'is the extension of everyday ethics into the nuances of the professional's practices' (Campbell 2003: 12). Hence 'professional ethics' refers to values and beliefs that provide guidance to a group of professionals in relation to their interactions with others such as clients (Wesley & Buyesse 2006). Researchers in the field tend to discuss professional ethics in relation to professional codes of ethics that are written to guide professionals and professional groups. These codes consist of principles that identify appropriate standards of behaviour in a given field. Moreover, there are professional standards that identify

appropriate types of behaviour, including ethical behaviour, for professionals in their given field. Baumgarten (1982: 282) claims that university teaching '[i]s a distinct professional activity, one with its own purposes and obligations'. He goes on to say that standards, fairness, and obligations to help others form part of the ethics in the academic profession.

The American Association of University Professors (1987) Statement on Professional Ethics (cited in Strom-Gottfried & D'Aprix 2006) includes five core standards for the profession: responsibility for scholarly competence; holding students to ethical standards; evaluating students in a way that reflects their worth; treating colleagues in a fair and respectful manner; and promoting conditions of free inquiry and promoting understanding of academic freedom. In Australia, universities have their own codes of practice that encourage appropriate standards of professionalism. For example, in Queensland, many universities derive their Code of Conduct from the *Public Sector Ethics Act 1994* (Qld) (Queensland Parliamentary Counsel 2010). Five ethical principles in the Act are: respect for the law and the system of government; respect for persons; integrity; diligence; and economy and efficiency. Application of these principles to universities is to ensure academics are 'committed to the highest ethical standards' (Queensland Parliamentary Counsel 2010: 6).

While ethical codes of conduct provide some guidance for professionals, they tend to be seen as limited because they are removed from everyday dilemmas (Shapiro & Stefkovich 2005; Sumison 2000) and fail to consider the complexity of different contexts. Several authors (Gregory & Hicks 1999; Pajo & McGhee 2003; Preston & Samford 2002; Whitton 1998) claim, however, that a code of ethics is an important part of an overall strategy for developing an ethical culture within an organisation.

**Ethic of Care**

An ethic of care comes from feminist scholarship and is a version of virtue or character ethics (Freakley & Burgh 2000). In their work, feminist writers, Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1992), focused on relationships, foregrounding love, respect, care, and sensitivity towards others. Hence, advocates of the ethic of care put relationships at the heart of decisions about ethical matters. These advocates promote 'situational sensitivity' (Dempster, Carter, Freakley, & Parry 2004). An ethic of care forms the basis of teacher-student relationships and advocates are responsive to 'the shifting relational and situational demands of others' (Campbell 2003: 33). It is likely academics who see teaching as an important dimension of their work will be drawn to an ethic of care.

Fitzmaurice (2008) examined 30 statements by lecturers who completed a postgraduate certificate in higher education on their philosophy of teaching to determine what they saw as good teaching in a university context. Thematic analysis revealed that lecturers did not present a narrow or technical view of teaching; rather their statements provided insights into the moral nature of teaching as they referred to honesty, respect and care in their dealings with students. One key theme, 'professional values and morality', referred to the importance of relationships with students based on honesty, truthfulness, and fairness with 'a personal commitment to be fair and just' (Fitzmaurice 2008: 349). According to Nixon (2004 in Fitzmaurice 2008: 349), teaching and research are part of academic practice based on 'truthfulness (accuracy or sincerity), respect (attentiveness or honesty) and authenticity (courage or compassion)'. References to professional ethics can be found in these points.

**Institutional ethics**

Institutional ethics is concerned with the way in which people live their lives within institutions (Preston & Sampford 2002). It is based on the assumption that individual

responses to ethical issues are 'necessarily constrained or supported' (Preston & Sampford, 2002: 9) within organisations and it is easier to act ethically in a culture that is deemed ethical than one that is not. According to Preston and Sampford (2002), institutional ethics needs to be built into the operations and core decision-making processes of organisations.

A starting point for considering institutional ethics is codes of ethical practice and policies and procedures with guidelines on appropriate standards of behaviour. These policies should be part of an overall strategy to create ethical institutions. Yet Preston and Sampford (2002: 51) argue that what is required is a range of measures or an '"ethics regime" that can transform the institution into a more ethical entity'. We concur with Gottlieb and Sanzgiri (1996), who argue that leaders have a key role to play in establishing an ethical tone in organisations. A good leader is an ethical leader (Ciulla 2006) who develops a culture that not only encourages open dialogue concerning ethics but also dissenting ideas and views. Thus, the ethical challenge facing leaders is 'multifaceted: it requires leading with integrity while respecting diverse, sometimes conflicting interests; it calls for leaders to be conscious about their own values and moral standards' (Maak & Pless 2006: 36). In sum, institutional ethics concerns using power ethically. Our interest in this paper, then, is leadership within universities and the perceptions of middle level academic leaders regarding the extent to which ethical dilemmas have been experienced by them and the nature or type and extent of unethical practices in their context. The next part of the paper discusses the methodology that steered the research.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study forms part of a larger research project in which academic leaders across all faculties in three Australian universities were invited to complete an e-survey that explored their perceptions of the prevalence of ethical dilemmas in their respective institutions. We

have defined academic leaders as those individuals who hold a course coordination role at either under-graduate or post-graduate levels within universities. We focus on course coordinators, whom we consider middle level academic leaders, because of the assumption that they are working closely with students and staff, and are positioned somewhere between senior managers (such as Deans and Heads of School) and academics who do not hold leadership positions. The assumption is that their location between these two groups would be more likely to leave them open to experience a variety of ethical dilemmas in their daily encounters.

Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were assured that their anonymous surveys would not reveal the name of their institution nor would there be any comparisons made across universities. Participants were asked to record their responses to two open-ended questions: (1) provide comments about the extent to which you have observed ethical practices and experienced dilemmas in their working environment; and (2) to describe an ethical dilemma that was faced and how it was resolved. The majority of the 174 e-survey responses included written comments from participants to these two questions. Many of the participants provided lengthy comments, indicating they were keen to put forward their views about this topic.

A process of identifying, coding and categorising the data was used to arrive at the themes (Patton 1990). Broad categories pertaining to ethical practices and ethical dilemmas that were discussed in the literature review helped to identify the direction for the analysis. The findings and discussion now follow.

**FINDINGS**

Two-thirds of participants in the e-survey indicated they had experienced an ethical dilemma or observed one or more in their work. In their comments these participants provided examples of ethical dilemmas as well as an array of unethical practices they had observed in action. Participants referred to the organisational culture of their university and how it had either supported or hindered the development of ethical practices and dilemmas.

**Organisational culture**

A small number of participants were satisfied that their workplace was ethical, referring to a very strong organisational culture that supported ethical practice. For example, one leader said:

> 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.

In contrast, most of the participants identified a different picture - one that recognised a range of broader pressures such as the commodification of higher education, its corporatisation, a lack of resources, lowering standards to attract and maintain fee paying students - pressures that were seen to be impacting on universities in adverse ways and contributing to an environment where values clashed. One participant summed up a clash between academic values and corporate values thus:

Corporate goal: Sell a service, charge a fee, get income and demonstrate cost efficiencies in the process. Academic goal: Act according to an agreed standard of excellence in teaching, research and service.

The quote cited below captures the changing university context, characterised by corporatisation and the commodification of knowledge. Noteworthy is its reference to international students: several participants indicated that their growing presence in universities is causing particular challenges for many academics:

The conceptualisation of university education as a commodity places significant importance on results rather than learning. This translates into pressure 'at the coalface' to ensure students progress through their degree quickly. Also, International students who are not even close to possessing the requisite language skills are admitted, and then struggle to cope with the material.

Other participants referred specifically to a lack of resources that resulted in junior staff taking on more responsibility than they should, and to the need to make difficult decisions about keeping some programs and closing others due to limited resources. The quote below is a pertinent illustration of these outcomes of managerialism:

We are constantly having to choose between two equally necessary elements in our workplace. We are ... forced - mainly through resource impoverishment - to jettison necessary things. People have to compromise or burn out fast.

Several comments by participants referred to a 'closed culture' within their respective universities that did not encourage questioning of unethical issues or practices. One academic

leader referred to '[c]oncerns raised by staff member [that] were ignored / devalued by senior staff resulting in persistence of unethical practice'. Yet the comments made by academic leaders indicated that they wanted opportunities to discuss ethical issues with their supervisors and colleagues and to have a greater say about decisions that affected them. An illustration suggesting the unethical use of power is cited below:

> The climate in the faculty does not make it likely that individuals will make a stand on ethical issues. The previous Head of the School ... departed under ambiguous and unexplained circumstances having clashed with the Head of Faculty. Anecdotally neither natural justice nor appropriate procedures were followed.

## Unethical practices

Participants' comments were coded in terms of the nature and focus of the unethical practices that they had observed within their respective universities. There were two broad categories of unethical practices and these related to academic dishonesty and unethical conduct or behaviour. Within concerns about academic dishonesty, there were three sub-categories: standards; plagiarism by staff and students; and student and staff dishonesty. There were seven categories of unethical conduct or behaviour and these included exploitation of sessional or junior staff; bullying or personal vendettas; favouritism; sexual impropriety; inattention to policies or guidelines; lack of professional ethics or of care; and lack of confidentiality.

*Academic dishonesty*

The main practice that was identified under academic dishonesty related to *standards* and how they were being compromised. The quote below refers to how standards were adjusted in order to keep the failure rate low:

There is too great an emphasis on shifting standards to meet the (in)capabilities [sic] of students in order to keep failure rates low....This amounts to a compromising of standards.

There were many comments about how low standards enabled undeserving students to receive pass grades. For example, one respondent said there was 'pressure being exerted to give students passing grades when the quality of their work in assessment does not warrant it'. Some comments referred to the pressure to pass particular groups of students such as international students because of their fee paying ability and for fear of being perceived as culturally insensitive:

The culture of the unit dictated that failing an international student equated to cultural insensitivity/discrimination. Yet when two domestic students were failed, no questions were asked.

At the heart of the many concerns raised by participants was the perception that senior staff had asked them to take an action which they thought was inappropriate or unfair.

*Plagiarism* was a frequently mentioned unethical practice undertaken by students. Many comments relating to plagiarism referred to times when it is 'detected and ignored' or when it is treated 'very leniently'. Participants pointed to situations where incidents of plagiarism had been reported but where resultant actions were overturned in students' favour by senior members of staff:

[A] student [was] accused of plagiarism which he admitted. The lecturer failed the student in the subject. This decision was overruled by the Dean.

Other examples of academic dishonesty referred to *student and staff dishonesty*. Here students falsified information and were dishonest in relation to submitting their work on time whereas staff were dishonest about the ownership of their work. An illustration of the latter was:

> a lecturer claimed that he had written several 'new' courses – [we] later found out that [he] had not and that the courses had been written by a previous lecturer who was given no credit for them.

*Unethical conduct or behaviour*

We have categorised seven main types of unethical conduct or behaviour. These categories are illustrated in Table 1.

Insert Table 1

Of these illustrations of unethical practices, the three most frequently mentioned fitted within the categories of bullying, exploitation of sessional staff or junior staff, and staff not following guidelines.

**Nature of Ethical Dilemmas**

The responses from several participants suggested that they experienced anxiety and tension when they found themselves faced with an ethical dilemma. The comment below is reflective of several participants' comments highlighting the degree of their anxiety:

> 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.

A closer examination revealed that participants faced a variety of ethical dilemmas ranging from conflicts of interest to issues of plagiarism, to underperforming staff and students, to those that caused them to question personal or professional ethics. Most of the dilemmas that surfaced for participants were connected to a clash between their professional ethics and other values. Based on the responses provided by participants, we have arrived at three main dilemmas:

*Professional ethics versus supervisor's directives*

Many examples provided by participants referred to dilemmas that emerged when there was a clash between their professional ethics and a supervisor's directives. As identified earlier, this tension often arose in terms of being instructed to lower standards or pass particular students. For example:

> I have observed course coordinators, part-time and full-time staff being pressured to raise marks for students against their judgement

> Being told explictly by the Head of School that I needed to 'drop my teaching standards, like everyone else has to'.

*Professional ethics versus ethic of care*

There were several examples of where academics' professional ethics were in tension with an ethic of care. For example, one participant said, 'whether to pass a student who is borderline'. Another referred to a dilemma of passing a student who failed his final supplementary exam. This student was an international student whose family were flying into Australia for his

graduation. The quotation below illustrates one participant's dilemma of having to balance the interests of a colleague (i.e., ethic of care) with those of students in a program (professional ethics and ethic of care):

> ... My colleague was experiencing an extremely difficult period due to chronic ill health and a family tragedy, and her teaching effectiveness and overall performance was significantly affected. She asked to be assigned a specific subject to coordinate - an important foundation subject which required a special sort of orientation and rapport with students - and I did not believe that she could perform that role effectively at that time. I was torn between the need for equitable treatment and support of my colleague and the needs of the students involved....

*Professional ethics versus rules and policies*

There were a number of illustrations of dilemmas between professional ethics and the rules and policies of the university that dictated a certain course of action The quote below highlights the tension that can sometimes arise for an academic leader between the policy and what they think is the best for students:

> Faculty quite often asks for us to implement initiatives that are not necessarily in the pedagogical interests of the majority of students.

Similar concerns can arise around policies related to supplementary assessment. The way one leader dealt with the issue was by resigning:

Having to provide supplementary assessment for students who have demonstrated a complete lack of commitment to study to assist them in gaining the opportunity to obtain a passing grade....The current policy in relation to supplementary assessment for students gaining a grade of 2 or 3 was part of one of two reasons for my resignation.

**To challenge or not to challenge? That is the question**

An important theme that came through the data was whether to challenge unethical practices, with a number of participants indicating they would not challenge what they deemed unethical practices for a variety of reasons including 'fear of legal action', being 'too busy', deeming it 'too hard and too time consuming', or previous experience having taught them not to 'rock the boat' because of negative repercussions. The first quote below reflects a decision to challenge student plagiarism, while the second comment comes from a participant who claims s/he would not pursue student plagiarism issues because of the 'personal cost':

A number of students were caught plagiarising on an assignment. There were two ways of approaching the situation: a) follow university processes and report the behaviour, or b) ignore it and give them low marks.    Following university procedures requires a large amount of paper work and detailed submissions. It would have been a much easier way forward to ignore the findings and mark the papers. Our team discussed the situation and decided to follow the formal process - in fairness to the other students.

Plagiarism by students [reported by staff] ... students not penalised. Students retaliated with unrelated accusations against staff - very unpleasant. Staff were advised not to pursue the matter... NONE OF US WOULD EVER, UNDER ANY

CIRCUMSTANCES, AGAIN REPORT A CASE OF STUDENT PLAGIARISM. THE PERSONAL COST TO STAFF IS TOO GREAT. STUDENTS HAVE ALL THE POWER. This is not an isolated incident... (capitals in original).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings from this research confirm the conclusions identified in the literature cited earlier. For example, misdemeanours such as plagiarism, cheating (Woody, 2008), sexual impropriety (Robie & Keeping 2004), and abuse of power (Ashford & Davis 2006) are seen to be common to the university context and were raised in this study. Upholding the standards of the profession through the evaluation of student work emerged as an ethical issue for academics – this was unsurprising given that assessment of student work is a component of academics' work (Robertson & Grant 1982). As indicated by many respondents, the process of inflating students' academic marks was viewed as unfair to the student concerned and to other students in that it violates the principle of academic honesty (Campbell 2003: 29). Such action contravenes professional Codes of Conduct for universities (e.g., QUT Staff Code of Conduct 2012) that uphold fairness and honesty in carrying out  professional duties towards and when dealing with students.

School teachers in a study by Colnerud (in Campell 2003) indicated that they experienced anxiety when they were asked to compromise their professionalism by punishing students whom they felt did not deserve to be punished. In the current study, some academics expressed a similar type of anxiety when they were asked not to administer the consequences of inappropriate behaviour (cheating, plagiarism, etc) to students.

A small number of comments made by the academic leaders referred to their organisation as being characterised by a supportive or a collaborative culture that promoted ethical practice.

Such a culture is one that is likely to uphold institutional ethics (Preston & Sampford 2002). Yet the majority of participants indicated the contrary - unethical practices were observed and supervisors or others in senior management either ignored or encouraged such practices to operate. This issue is taken up later in the discussion.

An important theme that emerged in this research was the question of whether one should challenge unethical behaviour and face wrong-doers, or do nothing. Most of the participants chose not to challenge for a variety of reasons, suggesting that they might be becoming tolerant of various types of ethical violations. Such avoidance contributes to a culture of unethical behaviour (Preston & Sampford 2002)

Participants were aware of the broader factors impacting on the university context that have been creating a fertile field in which dilemmas have been flourishing. This understanding was most clearly identified by a participant who contrasted corporate goals with academic goals and the competing tensions this brings. The three broad types of dilemmas that emerged from the findings (i.e., professional ethics versus supervisor's directives; professional ethics versus an ethic of care; and professional ethics versus rules and policies) are now considered.

*Professional ethics versus ethics of care*

A strong theme in the study was the desire of academic leaders to uphold professional standards by being just in their dealings with students and staff (Fitzmaurice 2008). However, their professional ethics clashed with an ethic of care when they were required to make a decision that involved their care or feelings for staff or students and brought into question their professional ethics regarding standards or a sense of fairness. In research on school teachers (Campbell 2003) and school leaders (Cranston, Ehrich & Kimber 2006), this tension was apparent. These researchers referred to educators who faced an ethical dilemma that

involved choosing between their colleagues (who were under-performing or acting in a way that was not deemed appropriate) and the well-being of students. Campbell (2003) referred to the tension that can arise for teachers in the complex area of student evaluations. She gave the example of the sympathic teacher who has to deal with the failing student who has tried so hard. Academic leaders in the current study made similar comments relating to passing or not passing particular groups of students.

*Professional ethics versus rules and policies*

The academic leaders mentioned times when their professional values clashed with policies or procedures they thought were unfair or inappropriate. Indeed, one of the academic leaders resigned her post as course coordinator because she could not uphold what was seen as the university's unreasonable policy on supplementary assessment. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) use the terms 'responsibility and accountability' as operating in tension with one another. In some ways their description of these terms is akin to the dilemmas that can emerge between professional ethics (i.e., responsibility to the profession) and policies and procedures (accountability via government mandates).

One of the academic leaders in the study said that ethical dilemmas within their organisation were 'rare as there are strong rules in place'. This comment suggests that staff within that organisation were aware of the rules and policies, and that those rules and policies were being followed. In contrast, a number of comments made by academic leaders suggested that policies and codes of behaviour could be better understood by academics, and that following such policies is preferable to behaving in *ad hoc* ways when dilemmas arise. As argued earlier, codes of conduct are an important framework to help professionals make decisions about ethical issues even though they cannot provide total clarity in terms of institutional expectations or the resolution of ethical dilemmas (Thompson 2004).

*Professional ethics versus supervisors' directives*

Comments from several academic leaders underscored the point that universities are political institutions where power is used to influence others, protect others, and achieve particular goals (Blase & Anderson 1995). Some participants referred to the misuse of power by supervisors or those in senior management when they used their legitimate power base to encourage, cajole or force course coordinators to pursue a course of action that did not align with their professional ethics. This was a case of authoritarian leadership (Blase & Anderson 1995) where there was little discussion or negotiation with staff.

Many comments from the academic leaders referred to situations when they were instructed to follow certain directives that were contrary to their professional ethics. Samier's (2008) notion of 'passive evil' and 'mute managers' resonated in participants' comments in this study when they referred to supervisors who ignored or devalued their pleas for remedying unethical practices. From the reported statements, there were clear examples of pressure being exerted by supervisors and this type of pressure has been reported in other research studies (Campbell 2003; Helton & Ray 2005). Similarly there were comments indicating that the supervisors of academic leaders were unsupportive when unethical practices were questioned. However, speaking out is needed when it comes to addressing unethical behaviour in organisations. As Gottlieb and Sanzgiri (1996) state, dialogue and discussion are critical in organisations so that basic ethical assumptions can be questioned, critiqued and new understandings developed. Indeed, analysis, critique, and discussion are important elements of academic work. As Gottlieb and Sanzgiri (1996: 1282) state, 'Leaders with integrity are able to engender the trust necessary for open dialogue concerning ethics, embedding new ethical assumptions at the group level'.

The nature of the ethical dilemma points to the need for institutional ethical decision making in universities, not only for individuals and their supervisors but also in terms of the policies and practices within universities (Preston & Sampford 2002). As we have argued elsewhere, if educational institutions are serious about embedding ethical practices into their culture and practices, then leadership (at all levels) needs to play a strong role (Cranston et al., 2006). Leadership is a key factor in the development and maintenance of culture within an organisation (Schein 1985) and leaders have the potential to have an impact on ethical decision making within the organisation by leading through example (Gottlieb & Sanzgiri, 1996).

Based on the findings of this study, we concur with Strom-Gottfried and D'Aprix (2006), who argue that academic leaders would benefit by opportunities to think about ethical dilemmas and how they might go about resolving them in a responsive manner. Some authors (Shapiro, & Gross 2008; Mahoney 2008) point out that an understanding of ethical reasoning is essential and they suggest case studies or authentic dilemmas be part of leadership training. Robie and Keeping (2004) argue that all new staff should be trained using a range of activities such as role plays and simulations. Woody (2008) concurs, saying that university or college teachers need opportunities to learn about ethical principles and how they might apply to the complex world of higher education classrooms.

Yet the reality is that ethics in teaching within universities has received scant attention (Wilson 1982; Mahony 2008) in comparison to research, where it has been given a higher profile with committees that approve research applications and advise on ethical matters. As the findings of this study indicate, ethical issues can and do arise in university teaching (Baumgarten 1982; Wilson 1982) and professional development learning opportunities would be a useful starting point.

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One of the worrying aspects of this study's findings is the sense of powerlessness that many academics apparently feel when matters of ethics arise and confront them in their practice. Even if university middle level academic leaders are prepared more effectively for problematic situations and dilemmas, there will be little change until the dominant culture of universities changes and institutional ethics are key features of the landscape. Leaders at all levels will need to encourage open and honest dialogue, and move away from the idea that ethical decision making is a solitary activity (Norberg & Johansson 2007).

**Table : 1  Categories of unethical practices and participants' illustrations of them**

| Category of unethical practices | Illustrations provided by participants |
|---|---|
| Exploitation of sessional staff or junior staff | 'Early career academics who are desperate for a) $ and b) opportunities to gain employment and research opportunities are often taken advantage of'. |
| Bullying or personal vendettas towards staff | 'Bullying power trip to control students – suggesting if they didn't do what was asked they would fail'. |
| Favouritism | 'Academic staff member teaching a family member but not assessing formal assignments'-. |
| Sexual impropriety | 'At my previous workplace a staff member was sleeping with students'. |
| Staff who do not follow policies and guidelines | 'In my experience as course coordinator, staff often relied on word of mouth for advice in dealing with ethical dilemmas instead of consulting [a manual] or Code of Conduct... they seemed to "make it up as they went along" rather than rely on any principles or policies'. |
| Lack of professional ethics or care | 'Not speaking to students about their marked paper as they [lecturers] "don't have time" and totally trust the marking of an inexperienced person in their team' |
| Confidentiality issues | 'Inappropriate discussions about academic job applicants and appointment'. |

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