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VOCATIONAL EDUCATION STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON ETHICS STUDY: EVIDENCE FROM ACCOUNTING STUDENTS

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Abstract

Vocational education must operate within a lifelong learning context. Accounting is a vocational study. Besides core accounting knowledge, thinking and practicing capabilities are required for an accountant while judgement with ethical consideration is an important capability. Thus, accounting students should apprehend ethics. This research aims to investigate accounting students' perception on the importance on ethics themes which are represented by 17 keywords, students were asked to rate how important they perceive an accounting graduate should have learnt these keywords in a curriculum. The focus is on all students, further to gender and the studying year (senior and junior). Data were collected from nine higher education institutes in Hong Kong. Overall, students (n=72) rated "codes of ethics" the most important and surprisingly "independence" as second. Male (39) and female (33) rated differently in many keywords, e.g. "corruption" & "social responsibility". The difference in rating between students at senior (34) and junior (38) years is narrow, with exception on "corruption", "corporate governance" and "insider trading". The findings offer an insight for educators in vocational based education to include appropriate ethics elements in accounting curriculum so to let students attain both core technical skills and skills for surviving in this ever-changing world.

Keywords

Vocational Education, Ethics, Higher Education, Accounting, Hong Kong

1. Introduction

The society is changing. Changes in society demands changes in educational goals. With an increased competition at work, along with the technological change and the aging demography, there is an interest in promoting learning throughout adult life. (HM Government 2017). Learning throughout adult life or lifelong education mean that all people should be taught what they want to learn, and learn better and use the knowledge they have learnt (UNESCO, 2017).

Nowadays entry-level job seeker understand that a higher education qualification may not help them to find a job, which is different from the past (Small, Shacklock & Marchant, 2018). Graduates cannot expect a job for life, so they must be able to respond to opportunity (Yorke and Harvey, 2005; Small et.al., 2018), vocational based education may help students in lifelong employment. While, vocational education must operate within a lifelong learning context (Jones, 2018).

Recruitment has become the top priority for an organization to achieve success as they are facing a “war of talent” (Saks and Uggerslev, 2010; Cheung and Agrawal, 2018). Higher education in this 21st century is ever-evolving. For the success of students, role of educator must be included (Celli and Young, 2017). Educator, being a higher education stakeholder, should bear in mind that graduates should attain employability, and they should be work-ready and contribute to economic growth (Small et.al., 2018). In order to let the graduates to have sufficient desired characteristics for increasing their employability, educators should give timely information to graduates (Small et.al., 2018).

Accounting study is one kind of vocational education. In preparing students for their roles as future professionals and for their staying in the profession, both technique knowledge and their capabilities to professionally engage with a changing future are essential. In other words, both the content knowledge requirements and the capabilities related to thinking and practicing are needed (Mourik & Wilkin, 2019). According to Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) stated that threshold capabilities are : judgment, knowledge, critical analysis and problem solving skills, communication, teamwork, and self-management, while under the category: “judgement” , it is about exercising judgement, under supervision to solve routine accounting problems, with appropriate use of perspectives (social, ethical, economic, regulatory, sustainability , governance and /or global) (Mourik and Wilkin, 2019) .Therefore, judgement with ethical consideration is one of the important capabilities that an accountant required.

There are academic skills that are beneficial and valuable to actual job performance (Bartolata, 2016). Gaa (1994, as cited in Dellaportas, 2006) states that for accountants, rarely will their technical competence be questioned, but the ethical standards will be questioned. There are relatively few financial

scandals that are actually caused by methodological errors in the application of technique, but there are lots of accounting dishonour cases caused by errors in judgement (Brooks & Dunn, 2018). The accounting profession suffered a series of setbacks when corporate scandals involving Enron and WorldCom. In the US (Conroy and Emerson 2004; Emerson, Conroy et al. 2007). As the falling of ethical standards is a major concern of the accounting professionals, and therefore I would like to explore on this topic.

1.1 Purpose of this Study

This study investigates the perception of the accounting students on the importance of the ethics education. Ethics is part of the accounting education in Hong Kong, and there are many ethics themes included in ethics education. Students may consider some of the themes are more important and they have to learn them in the academic curriculum. *What are the students' perception on the importance of ethics themes (keywords) in the accounting curriculum;* this being the first research question (RQ). In additional, demographic data of each respondent were collected, the data included are: gender and the academic year they are studying in. The second RQ *-is there any difference between female and male students on their perception on the importance of these themes (keywords);* the third RQ *- is there a difference between the students' year- of- study on their perception on the importance of these themes (keywords).*

2. Methodology

2.1 Respondents

A survey was administrated 72 were accounting students from 9 higher education institutions in Hong Kong and the data were collected from May to Nov 2016.

2.2 Survey Instrument

Two questions were designed to check the eligibility of the participants. The first question checks whether the participants are over 18 of age. The second question checks whether the participants have taken at least one ethics related module in their post-secondary institution. Only if both the answers were positive was the participant eligible for this study and allowed to complete the remaining part of the questionnaire.

The 17 keywords (themes) were used in the survey, the keywords were adopted from Cheung and Agrawal's study in 2014. The 17 keywords are: ethics theories, codes of ethics, corporate governance, ethical dilemma, whistle blowing, integrity, independence, threat and safeguard, conflict of interest, devotion, insider trading, regulatory framework, social responsibility, stakeholder theory,

perseverance, consistency and corruption (Cheung, 2014). 14 keywords were selected from various ethics related syllabuses from either higher education institutes or professional accounting examination bodies, these words were selected because of their high frequency of appearance on syllabuses, while for the remaining 3 (devotion, perseverance and consistency) were selected according to experts' advice. The involvement of experts' advice because Ethics is a study that it may cover something more than a textbook can present (Cheung, 2014).

2.3 Data Gathering Procedures

Convenience sampling was adopted. Firstly, hard copies of the questionnaire were distributed to students whom studied in the higher education institutes that the author worked at then. The questionnaire was distributed through the research assistant and the author was not in the classroom, students were free to return the questionnaires. Meanwhile, emails were sent out to invite educators who worked in other higher education institutes to distribute questionnaire, sadly, only one agreed to distribute the questionnaire to their students. Copies of questionnaire were sent to that higher education institution where students were free to fill in and return the questionnaires. It was observed that the topic did not attract much attention from other educators or there were administrative issues concerned so the questionnaire was not able to be distributed in their institutions, therefore, this study required another round of data collection. The research assistant sent the link of the online questionnaire to those students she knew. Snowballs method was also adopted. We asked our respondents to forward this emails to their friends that might be able to fill in this questionnaire. As this study focused on vocational programmes, so only data from accounting students (n=72) were used.

2.4 Statistical Instrument

I use SPSS version 20 to analysis the data.

There were in total 72 accounting students, their demographic data, for example, gender, year of study were analyzed. Mean, standard deviation, and the total number was run under the SPSS. Students were asked to give score from 1 (least important) to 5 (most important) for the 17 keywords. While for the counting of the rank, the numbers were inputted by me, the rank is from 1 to 17, showing the most important to least important of the keywords.

3. Result and Discussion

Research questions of this study are: RQ1- the perception of the accounting students on the importance of the ethics related keywords; RQ1a -is there any difference between female and male

students on their perception on the importance of these keywords; RQ1b) is there a difference between the year of study of students on their perception on the importance of these keywords.

3.1 General

For these 72 accounting students, 39 (54.2%) are male and 33 (45.8%) are female. The distribution of gender is shown on Table 1 as below.

Table 1: *The Distribution of Male and Female Students*

	Frequency	Percent
Male	39	54.2
Female	33	45.8
Total	72	100.0

The students are in four years degree programme. Students are in year 1, 2, 3 and 4 and the number of the students are distributed as follows: 18 (25%), 20 (27.8%), 8 (11.1%) and 26 (36.1%) respectively. For analysis purpose, I have re-allocated them in two levels, higher level (n=34, 47.2%) which are the year 3 and year 4 students, and lower level (n= 38, 52.8%) which are the year 1 and year 2 students. The distribution is shown on the table 2.

Table 2: *The Distribution of the Year 1, 2, 3 & 4 Students*

Academic year	Frequency	Precent	Frequency	Percent
Year 1	18	25.0	38	52.8
Year 2	20	27.8		
Year 3	8	11.1	34	47.2
Year 4	26	36.1		
Total	72	100.0	72	100.0

3.2 Accounting Students

RQ1- the perception of the accounting students on the importance of the ethics related keywords

Overall, for the accounting students, they find “codes of ethics” are the most important elements that the accounting student expects the entry level accounting graduates should have learnt in their academic curriculum. While the second important element should be learnt is “ Independence”. For me, being an accountant for almost over 20 years, I find this is quite interesting as independence is one of the attributes that an accountant required to have their accounts prepared but many other keywords e.g.

integrity would generally be considered at a high rank. The third is “ethical dilemma”, it is quite understandable as learning how to deal with ethical dilemma is a serious and important element for students. Those keywords in the middle ranks are reasonable and understandable. While I would like to point out the stakeholder theory is considered not very important, rank 16 out of 17, it is within my expectation as students always think the theory is difficult to understand and usually get a lower score.

The mean and rank of the overall 72 students is shown on Table 3 as below.

Table 3: The Mean and Rank of the Overall 72 Students

Keywords (All students, N=72)	Rank	Mean	Standard Deviation
Ethics theory	10	3.74	.769
Codes of ethics	1	4.0	.805
Corporate governance	8	3.87	.735
Ethical dilemma	3	3.96	.759
Whistle blowing	12	3.72	.907
Integrity	5	3.92	.931
Independence	2	3.99	.847
Threat and safeguard	9	3.85	.833
Conflict of interest	6	3.90	1.071
Devotion	15	3.63	.895
Insider trading	13	3.65	.922
Regulatory	10	3.74	.787
Social responsibility	7	3.88	.963
Stakeholder theory	16	3.58	.783
Perseverance	13	3.65	.715
Consistency	17	3.57	.836
Corruption	4	3.94	.785

3.3 Gender

RQ2 -is there any difference between female and male students on their perception on the importance of these keywords

There were 39 male and 33 female respondents. As gender is always a significant factor in ethics related studies and I have made the comparison. For male and female students, they do have quite a different view on the elements that they think is important for students to learn in ethics education. For example, male students rank “corruption” the first while female the seventh, and for “social responsibility”, male students rank it the tenth while female the third. In addition, for the two theories, namely “ethics theory” and “stakeholder theory”, male students rank the two as “12” and “17”, while female “8” and “12”.

While for whistle blowing which is a very practical topic, male rank it “14” while women “8”. It is supported by literatures. The main “whistle blowers” at Enron and WorldCom were Sherron Watkins and Cynthia Cooper respectively, both of whom are women (Cheung and Agrawal, 2018, Emerson et al., 2007). While for the added non text-book items, “Devotion” and “Perseverance”, male rank them as “11” & “12” and female as “16” and “15”.

The details showing the gender perception presented on table 4.

Table 4: *The Male and Female Students’ Perception on the Importance of the 17 Keywords*

Gender	Male n=39			Female n=33			^
	Rank	Mean	Std. Dev	Rank	Mean	Std. Dev	
Ethics theory	12	3.69	.863	8	3.79	.650	4
Codes of ethics	5	3.90	.821	1	4.12	.781	4
Corporate governance	8	3.82	.790	6	3.94	.669	2
Ethical dilemma	7	3.85	.875	2	4.09	.579	5
Whistle blowing	14	3.67	1.034	8	3.79	.740	6
Integrity	6	3.87	1.080	4	3.97	.728	2
Independence	2	4.00	.889	4	3.97	.810	-2
Threat and safeguard	4	3.92	.623	11	3.76	1.032	-7
Conflict of interest	2	4.00	1.139	8	3.79	.992	-6
Devotion	11	3.72	.916	16	3.52	.870	-5
Insider trading	16	3.62	.963	13	3.70	.883	3
Regulatory	9	3.79	.732	14	3.67	.854	5
Social responsibility	10	3.74	1.069	3	4.03	.810	7

Stakeholder theory	17	3.46	.822	12	3.73	.719	5
Perseverance	12	3.69	.694	15	3.61	.747	-3
Consistency	15	3.64	.811	17	3.48	.870	-2
Corruption	1	4.03	.668	7	3.85	.906	-6

^= Difference in ranks between male and female (+ means rank in male is higher than rank in female counterpart)

3.4 Levels of Study

RQ1b) is there a difference between the year of study of students for their perception on the importance of these keywords?

Students were divided into higher or lower levels for comparison. There is small rank difference between these two groups. For example, higher and lower levels both rank “codes of ethics” the number one topic that students should learn. For corporate governance, students in higher level consider it more important than those in the lower level. Corporate governance is a more specific ethical related topic in accounting, we are talking about how an organization be administrated in a fair way. As it is so specific so it will be taught in year 3 and 4, while in this study, we allow students to fill in this questionnaire only when they had learnt at least a single subject in ethics. In some higher education institutions, business ethics are studied in year 1 or year 2, in such a general module, corporate governance is not taught so students of lower levels do not understand what corporate governance is so they are not able to consider it important. While higher level students do consider corruption is the number one important to learn, as a teacher of accounting, I am happy of this finding that means in a higher level they are really concerned with practical issues. Meanwhile, for another practical keyword “insider trading”, higher level rank it “11” while the lower as “17”, it may show the students studying at higher level consider learning insider trading (a practical topic) is important. Table 5 showing the detailed ranks of the higher and lower levels students.

Table 5: The Higher and Lower Levels Students' Perception on the Importance of the 17 Keywords

Higher/ Lower	Higher n=34			Lower n=38			^
	Rank	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank	Mean	Std. Dev.	
Ethics theory	9	3.85	.702	12	3.63	.819	-3
Codes of ethics	1	4.03	.758	1	3.97	.854	0
Corporate governance	4	3.94	.747	9	3.82	.73	-5
Ethical dilemma	4	3.94	.694	1	3.97	.822	3
Whistle blowing	13	3.79	.729	14	3.66	1.047	1
Integrity	4	3.94	.851	4	3.89	1.008	0
Independence	1	4.03	.797	3	3.95	.899	-2
Threat and safeguard	9	3.85	.892	8	3.84	.789	1
Conflict of interest	7	3.91	1.071	4	3.89	1.085	3
Devotion	17	3.53	.896	10	3.71	.898	7
Insider trading	11	3.82	.999	17	3.5	.83	-6
Regulatory	11	3.82	.797	11	3.66	.781	0
Social responsibility	8	3.88	.880	6	3.87	1.044	2
Stakeholder theory	15	3.62	.697	16	3.55	.86	-1
Perseverance	14	3.68	.806	12	3.63	.633	2
Consistency	16	3.56	.894	15	3.58	.793	1
Corruption	1	4.03	.797	6	3.87	.777	-5

^= Difference in ranks between male and female (+ means rank in male is higher than. rank in female counterpart)

4. Conclusion and Future Challenges

Accounting is a vocational study, the majority students taking this kind of programme should aim to work in (or related in) accounting field after their graduation. And, ethics education is an essential constituent an accounting students should apprehend. In the future, as we understand that the working environment has been changed, and people may not work for a job for his whole life. Being vocational educational based educators, we should pay more attention to the curriculum design so to let students to

have ability to achieve not only core technical skills but also skills that enable them to survive in this ever-changing world. Ethics education is definitely one of the skills that students should learn in the vocational studies.

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Appendix

What, according to you, is the importance of the following items for ethics education – that you expect the entry level accounting graduates to have learnt in their academic curriculum? “1”-Totally unimportant, “2”-Unimportant, “3”-Neither important nor unimportant, “4”-Important, “5”-Very important

	Students to have learnt:	Totally Unimportant	Unimportant	Neither Important nor	Important	Very important
1	Ethics theories, e.g., Kohlberg’s framework	1	2	3	4	5
2	Codes of ethics	1	2	3	4	5
3	Corporate governance	1	2	3	4	5
4	Resolving Ethical dilemma	1	2	3	4	5
5	Whistle blowing	1	2	3	4	5
6	Integrity	1	2	3	4	5
7	Independence	1	2	3	4	5
8	Threat and safeguard	1	2	3	4	5
9	Conflict of interest	1	2	3	4	5
10	Devotion (feelings of strong affection/ attachment/love)	1	2	3	4	5
11	Insider trading	1	2	3	4	5
12	Regulatory framework	1	2	3	4	5
13	Social responsibility	1	2	3	4	5
14	Stakeholder theory	1	2	3	4	5
15	Perseverance (continued effort to do something despite difficulties)	1	2	3	4	5
16	Consistency	1	2	3	4	5
17	Corruption issues	1	2	3	4	5