Research Article

An Exploratory Study for Constructing Ethics Development Framework: Education Needs on Ethics for Career Development

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Abstract

Different domains of ethics education have been discussed in several studies in recent decades. However, limited studies were conducted to understand students' perceptions on different ethics education elements for constructing an integrated ethics development framework. This research attempted to study students' perceptions on six ethical dimensions, including (i) personal attitudes, (ii) interpersonal relationships, (iii) teamwork, (iv) anti-discrimination, (v) responsibilities to stakeholders, and (iv) codes of ethics and regulations. Results indicated that there are high education needs on these dimensions. This study also provided evidence that case studies and ethics learning activities were perceived as more effective learning approaches from students' perspectives. The findings of this research provide educators insights into developing ethics education programmes and career development activities for students.

Keywords: ethics education, career development, ethics development

Introduction

Different streams of research on ethics education have been discussed in recent decades. An array of studies addressed the importance of ethics education. A substantial amount of research focused on exploring different pedagogies and examining the effectiveness of ethics education. Though the importance of ethics education and different pedagogies have been widely covered in the existing literature, limited studies have been conducted to develop a more holistic training framework for ethics development in the school setting. For implementing an ethics education programme in the school setting,

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this paper discussed the education needs on several main ethics contents to be included in the framework. Our findings also give an insight on the students' perception of the need of ethics education particularly for their career development.

Literature Review

Personal Attitudes

Attitude is defined as "a mental or neutral state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence on the individual's response to all objects and situations to which it is related" (Allport, 1935). A report by HKEDB (Education Bureau, 2019) noted that the need for work attitudes and interpersonal skills has continuously ranked more highly than the technical knowledge required for the job over the past 12 years of the survey period. It is widely recognized that work attitude is critical for career development and job performance (Riketta, 2008). In the surveys conducted from 1988 to 2016 by Education Bureau in Hong Kong, work attitude is cited as the most important factor when considering the performance of the fresh graduates (Education Bureau, 1998; Education Bureau, 2019). Helping the undergraduates to prepare them with the attitudes that are driving their success in their careers becoming one of the main topics in higher education. It is believed that some education can be conducted to enhance the students' attitudes toward the way of bringing benefits to their future employers (Liang et al., 2014).

A wide range of studies was conducted to measure the work attitude and factors influencing it (Schleicher et. al, 2015, Judge, 2012). Schleicher applied the job attitude strength (JAS) theory to revise the four indicators, including structural consistency, latitude of rejection, attitude certainty, and attitude extremity. Judge's work addressed the integrated efforts of factors on the job attitude.

McMurray et al. (2016) investigated the important attributes of graduates from employers' perspectives. The paper covered a wide range of factors and transferability skills that employers valued more when they recruited graduates. Results indicated that personal attitudes, trustworthiness, and reliability are among the top items on the list. Employers rated these personal attitudes-related items with scores above 4.5 (with a score of 5 as the most important factor). Moreover, as cited in the paper by Paolini (2020), intrapersonal attributes such as growth mindset and characters are significant elements of career readiness (CASEL, 2019).

Interpersonal Relationship

A significant amount of literature discussed the importance of interpersonal skills in work ethics. In addition to intrapersonal skills, Paolini (2020) also pointed out that interpersonal skills are core elements for career success. According to Paolini (2020), interpersonal skills consist of some ethics-related competencies such as conscientiousness, accountability, conflict resolution and empathy, and training on these aspects may improve a person's interaction with others in the workplace. In the study with the context of Engineering, Grohman, Gans, Lee, and Brown (2020) reminded that ethical decision-making was not confined to an individual level, but sometimes decisions were made in a team setting in reality.

Harris and Rogers (2008) discussed the soft skills required for students in the fields of technology or engineering. They listed 16 nontechnical competencies based on perspectives from a panel of professors in the fields of engineering. It was found that the three items "demonstrate honesty", "demonstrate a strong work ethic", and "understand aspects of group dynamics" showed a mean score of 3 or above, based on a four-point Likert scale with a score of 4 indicating 'strongly agree'. Results provided evidence that personal qualities such as attitudes and work ethics are important attributes required for career development.

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Besides, 'understanding group dynamics" pointed out the importance of interpersonal relationship in the professionals of technology and engineering. Webb (2015) mentioned the relationship between ethics and interpersonal theories. According to the Model of Ethics with Contemporary Communication (Webb 2015), communication ethics includes four areas: intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, group communication, and public communication. Intrapersonal communication relates factors such as honesty, taking responsibility, and self-awareness. Webb (2015) also extended the discussion to interpersonal communication and small group communication, and covered contents such as seeing others' points of view, awareness of the boundaries and cultural influences, and being a responsible group leader and group member in the paper. Several researchers attempted to explore pedagogies for education on teamwork. Betta (2016) examined the use of team-based learning to equip students with teamwork skills. Students have positive feedback on this semester-long course. Galbraith and Web (2013) noted the importance of teamwork in workplace, and they discussed some practices for classroom training on teamwork. Though Galbraith and Web (2013) covered ethical related content such as trust, accountability, honesty, and conflict, the paper discussed some good practices of teamwork from a broader perspective that consists of a wide range of elements such as choosing teammates, teamwork progress, productive team meetings, problem-solving and communications among teammates. In view of the importance of interpersonal skills, more studies are required for further investigation on students' perception of interpersonal skills, and there is a need to further explore more pedagogies for ethics training specifically on interpersonal skills.

Responsibilities to stakeholders

Ethics education is not confined only to personal attitudes and interpersonal communication. Scholars have devoted efforts to studying the importance of ethical responsibilities to stakeholders. Stakeholders refer to a person who has "a legitimate or vested interest in the activities of an organization" (Heery, E. et al., 2017). There is evidence that ethical firms can create values and lead to financial returns. Karim, Suh, and Tang (2016) mentioned that there was a positive reaction from the market toward the ethical firms around the announcement of ethical companies. According to Freeman (2004), stakeholders refer to any individual (or any group) that can affect or is affected by the operation of the firm or organization. Freeman (2004) also discussed the positive relationship between stakeholder management and the financial performance of companies. Existing literature (McCormick, Buttrick, and McGowan, 2018; Chauhan and Sukhmani, 2020; Chen et al., 2020) provided evidence on the positive impact of ethical responsibilities on stakeholders in different places and sectors. The importance of responsibilities to stakeholders justifies including this training item in the ethics development framework.

In relation to responsibilities to stakeholders, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is widely discussed in the existing literature. Different scholars have studied the effectiveness of incorporating CSR elements in the curriculum of different subject domains. Maxfield (2011) described the education of CSR in the context of economics. Haskin and Burke (2016) discussed the background of sustainability accounting standards, and they suggested an outline to incorporate sustainability reporting in an accounting course. As mentioned by Persons (2012), the scandals of big companies such as Enron and WorldCom have called for more attention to the importance of CSR in a global context. To increase students' awareness on these issues, she proposed the incorporation of CSR elements in the business course through assignments, CSR cases, and ethics scenarios. She suggested helping students appreciate the importance of CSR as these issues will shape the business strategies in the coming decade. The importance of this element suggests further studies on students'

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perception on CSR for constructing a holistic ethics development framework.   Jorge et al (2015) studied how the CSR contents were incorporated in accounting and auditing masters which are highly ranked by the Eduniversal ratings, and they found that CSR and ethics education were still underdeveloped in accordance with the society's expectation on ethics and CSR related values. The deficiency of current CSR education indicates a research gap for more research on the ethics education on CSR.

Code of ethics

"Codes of practice set out the standards of practice and conduct workers and their employers should meet. They are intended to regulate the workforce and contribute to increasing levels of professionalism and public protection" (Harris, J., & White, V., 2018). The growing attention to corporate social responsibilities contributes to the development of a code of ethics in different industries. Several studies had discussed the code of ethics in different sectors such as accounting, hospitality management, nursing, and engineering (Farrell and Cobbin, 2000; Cameron and O'Leary, 2015; Tavitiyaman et al., 2019; LeDuc and Kotzer, 2009; MIchelfelder and Jones, 2013). Eijsbouts (2017) described the development of a code of conduct, and the relationship among code of conduct, soft laws, and hard laws. With the aim to prepare students entering workplace, educators should not undermine the training needs on understanding codes of ethics, relevant regulations, and laws. Discussion on the teaching of code of ethics in curriculum was also found in the existing literature. The role of IT was evident in different sectors, and the importance of IT called for more attention on the code of ethics in the IT field. Brooks (2010) described the online classroom approach of developing a code of ethics in the IT discipline. Davenpont and Thompson and Templeton (2015) studied the situation of Educator Preparation Programs in Texas, they found that most teachers included code of ethics elements in the curriculum. However, minimal specific training opportunities in this

aspect were provided to them. Amlie (2010) discussed about teaching ethics in the field of accounting education. Apart from examining the teaching practice at the College level, he also discussed how the professional bodies implemented the education of code of ethics for the accounting profession. Murphy (2007) mentioned the framework for teaching candidates adopted for The University of Central Oklahoma College of Education and Professional Studies (UCO). According to the UCO Professional Code of Ethics for Teachers Candidates, the framework consists of three main components including commitment to students, commitment to profession, and commitment to community (Murphy 2007). Existing literature indicated that codes of ethics are important elements of ethics education.

Multi-dimensions and holistic approach of Ethics Education

Among the existing literature, arrays of studies focused on one or a few ethics elements as the substances for ethics education. Limited studies have been found to discuss ethics education from a more holistic approach. Several studies indicated that a holistic approach for ethics education requires a wider coverage of different aspects under the domain of ethics. Korkut and Sinclair (2020) noted the role of rational and nonrational factors in ethical decision process. Apart from traditional content such as codes of ethics, codes of conduct, relevant laws and regulations, Korkut and Sinclair (2020) also called for attention to other aspects such as emotions, personalities, values, and professional attitudes such as honesty and responsibility. Hitt, Holles, and Lefton (2020) described the synthesis of learning on issues of personal, professional, and environmental ethics in two multidisciplinary courses in the engineering curriculum. They pointed out that integral ethics education required students to apply values-sensitive analysis, teamwork, communications, and ethical reasoning in the Engineering context. Gysbers (2013) suggested a whole school-community approach for enhancing students' readiness to

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enter the workplace. Gysbers (2013) pointed out that school counselling programs should consist of "Personal and Social Development", "Academic Development" and "Career Development". However, this suggestion attempted to help students become more ready for a career instead of focusing on ethics education. Model of Ethics with Contemporary Communication (Webb 2015) introduced four areas, including intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, group communication, and public communication. Though this model outlined the content into four areas, this model mainly focused on ethics communication rather than covering a broader scope of ethics. Anggraini, Siswanto, and Dewi (2020) stated that students' learning experience has a positive effect on their awareness of ethics and their ability to make ethical decisions. They suggested intensifying the ethics training through curricular and extra-curricular activities. This suggestion justifies further study for developing a holistic approach on ethics education.

An Integrated Ethics Development Framework

Research Questions & Objectives

Wong (2018) conducted a pilot study and proposed an ethics training framework that consists of four ethics areas, including (i) personal attitudes, (ii) interpersonal relationships, (iii) responsibilities to stakeholders, and (iv) codes of ethics and regulations. This current study extended the pilot study by Wong (2018) for developing a more holistic approach for ethics education. There are four main objectives of this exploratory research. First, this research studied students' perceptions on the four main ethical aspects that cover six dimensions of ethics education as stated in figure 1 (Objective 1). Second, this study also attempted to understand more about the effectiveness of different ethics learning approaches (Objective 2). Third, this research also explored specific ethics topics for

implementing an ethics training framework (Objective 3). Fourth, experts' comments were also collected to provide another perspective on the ethical content and approach for developing an ethics training framework (Objective 4).

Research Design and Methodology

The questionnaires were delivered to the students in a community college for two rounds in the academic year of 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. Data collected in round 1 and 2 questionnaires were used to study Objectives 1 and 2. Round 2 of the questionnaire also added another section of questions for addressing objective 3 of the research. The third round of the questionnaire was sent to purposefully invited social workers as an expert panel for collecting their views for the study on objective 4.

The preliminary analysis of the first-round questionnaires was conducted, and the results showed that students perceived high needs in all six dimensions of the proposed ethics education framework (Wong et. al., 2021). To explore some potential specific topics for implementing ethics education activities, another group of students was invited to participate in the second round of the questionnaire with more questions added.

In a total of the two rounds of questionnaires, 67 tertiary students (49.3% were males and 50.7% were females) participated in the survey voluntarily. Of the students surveyed, most of the respondents were from Business programmes (58.2%), students from Social Science programme (23.9%), and IT, Engineering, and Science programmes (10.4%) with fewer from Art and other programmes (7.5%). In which, 80.6% of the respondents studied sub-degree programmes and 19.4% of the respondents studied degree programmes.

The questionnaire used in the first two rounds of surveys consisted of six statements that adopted the 7-point Likert Scale ranging from

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the highest level of training needs (score of 7) to the lowest level of training needs (score of 1) with the aims of understanding students' perception of the ethics training needs for entering workplace settings. The collected data were, then, analyzed to figure out the frequency and mean of the results. Besides, they were asked to answer an open-ended question to specify the reasons for their view. An analysis was made based on the respondents' wordings and expressions in the questionnaire to have a deeper understanding of their perception of the importance of ethics training in general for career development.

The survey also aims at collecting the respondents' input on pedagogy for ethics education and they were asked to choose the effective approach(es) of ethics training to help them prepare for internship or workplace setting. The options for selection included: lecturing, case studies for discussion, ethics learning and activities, and self-reading materials. The collected data were analyzed to calculate the percentage of the results. The questionnaire used in the round two surveys was modified for collecting experts' views in the third-round survey.

Results and Findings

(i)   Students' Perceptions on the Training Needs of Ethics Elements

Respondents were asked to indicate the level of training needs in six different dimensions, including personal attitudes, interpersonal skills, teamwork, anti-discrimination, responsibilities to stakeholders, and code of ethics in professionals. From the results (See Figure 1), it was noted that all six dimensions indicated a mean score of 5 or above (out of 7). Results show that the respondents indicated higher training needs on interpersonal skills (mean score: 5.70), personal attitudes (mean score: 5.64), and teamwork (mean score: 5.61). Students also reported high training needs on areas of responsibility to stakeholders (mean score: 5.39), the code of ethics in professionals (mean score: 5.30), and anti-discrimination (mean score: 5.15). All the respondents (67 students) agreed that ethics training is important for internship or career development when they answered the question about the importance of ethics training in general.
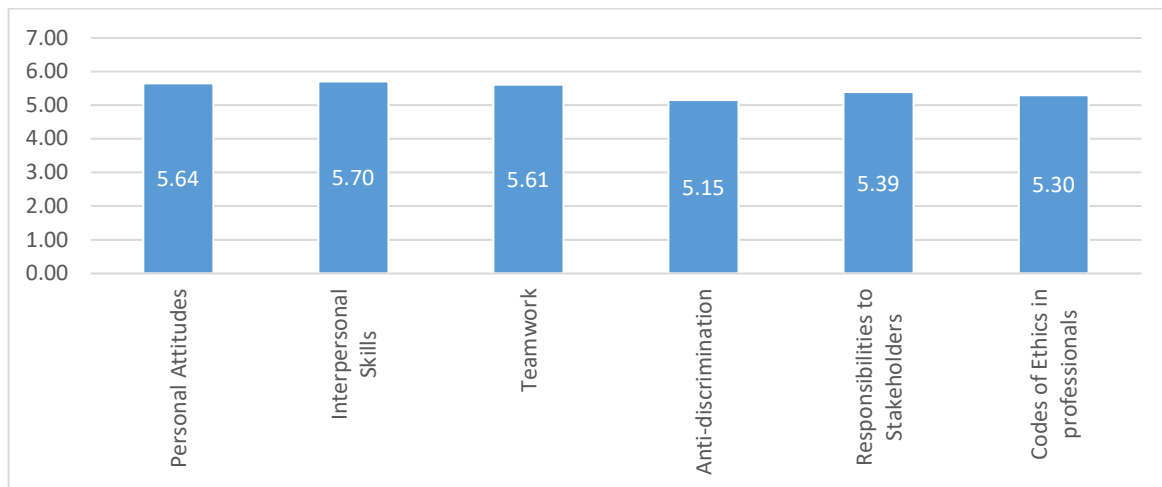

Figure 1: Students' Perception on Six Dimensions of Ethics Education

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Regarding the importance of ethics training needs, an open-ended question was set to further explore why respondents thought that ethics training was important. 61.2% of the respondents (41 out of 67 respondents) answered that question and an analysis was conducted on the wordings and expressions given by these 41 students. It was found that five themes were identified from the responses received for explaining students' perception on the importance of ethics training. The top two themes revealed by the respondents are "ethics as essential personal attributes" (30.4%), and "ethics is related to decision making at work or work performance (28.3%)". 15.2% of the respondents believed that "ethics is related to interpersonal relationships", and "ethics is important to the society and welfare of others". Compared with other themes, fewer respondents (10.9%) believed that "ethics education may help to avoid violating the laws, or to avoid mistakes". The lower percentage of responses for this theme indicated that more education may be needed for increasing students' awareness on the negative consequences and legal liabilities of unethical decisions. Besides, the findings of these open-ended questions may help educators to have more understanding of students' motives for joining ethics training activities, and hence provide insights for designing promotional materials for ethics training activities that may make the activities more appealing to the target students.

(ii) Effective Approach for Ethics Learning from Students' Perceptions

The respondents were also asked which approach(es) of ethics training is more effective for helping them to prepare for an internship or workplace setting. The approaches of case studies for discussion (36.4%), ethics learning activities (32.7%), and lecturing with training materials and points of reminders (25.5%) are perceived to be more effective than self-reading materials (5.5%) for learning ethics (See Figure 2).
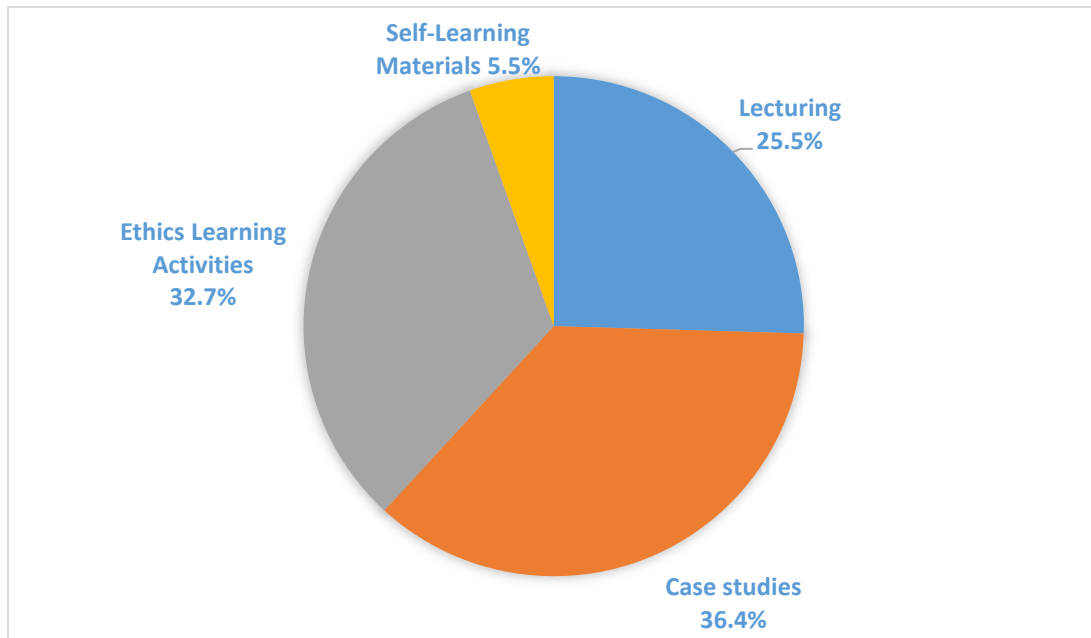

Figure 2: Effective Approaches for Ethics Learning from Students' Perception

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(ii)   Perceptions on Specific Ethics Topics

In the second round of the questionnaire, additional questions about specific ethical topics were included in the questionnaire. The second round of the questionnaire aims to supplement the first round of the questionnaire in two aspects. First, the content covered in the first round is broad dimensions of ethical education. More understanding of students' preferences on content for implementing ethical education programme is needed. Hence, the second round of the questionnaire also includes topics such as work etiquette and handling conflict of company interests and public interests. Second, students may tend to give a higher score on six dimensions based on the expectation of general others in the first round of the questionnaire. Instead of using the 7-Likert scale in the first round of the questionnaire, students were given a list of

ethical topics for their selection in the second round of the questionnaire, and they can select more than one topic if they want. In spite of the smaller scale of this round of the questionnaire, results may help to provide more understanding of students' ratings on the ethical content options.

In the second round of the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate whether they want to have more understanding of ethical content, including (i) personal attitudes, (ii), work etiquette, (iii) equal opportunities, (iv) teamwork and communication, (v) about handling conflict of company interests and public interests, and (vi) about laws and regulations relevant to their programme of studies. 11 responses in this section were received.   Results (Table 1) show that students have a higher preference for work etiquette and handling conflict of company interests and public interests.

Table 1: Students' Preference on Specific Ethical Contents

	Number of responses selecting this topic	Percentage of students selecting this topic	Remarks
Personal Attitudes	6	55%	
Work Etiquettes	9	82%	Higher Preference
Equal Opportunities	5	45%	
Teamwork and Communication	6	55%	
Handling Conflict of Company Interests and Public Interests	9	82%	Higher Preference
Laws and Regulations relevant to students' programme of studies	5	45%	

(iv) Training needs on Ethical Dimensions from Experts Panel

The above results provided evidence that supports the training needs on the proposed ethics aspects.   However, the first phase findings mainly described perceptions from students without input from other stakeholders such as career service counselling.

To further increase the validity of the results, the third round of the survey was conducted to collect feedback from expert opinion (objective 4). Questionnaires were sent to social workers in the area of career development counselling with at least 3 years of relevant experience. Responses from three experts were received, and the profile of respondents was shown below (Table 2).

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Table 2: Experience Profile of the Expert Panel

	Gender	Year of experience in career development	Year of experience in arranging students' internship
Expert 1	Female	10	10
Expert 2	Male	3	1
Expert 3	Male	15	1

Based on the results of the third round of the survey, the training needs on the six ethical areas and topics were supported by the input from expert opinions (Table 3 & 4). Survey results on students' perceptions and experts' opinions were summarized in Table 5.

Table 3: Experts' Opinions on the Six Dimensions of the proposed Ethics Development Framework

Six items of ethics training framework	Mean score by experts (7-Likert scale; score of 7 as the highest training needs)
Personal Attitudes	6.67
Interpersonal Relationship	6
Teamwork	6
Anti-discrimination	4.67
Responsibilities to Stakeholders	5.67
Code of Ethics in Professionals	5

Table 4: Experts' Opinions on the effectiveness of ethics education approach and specific ethics contents

	Preferred approach(es)	Reasons	Higher training needs on specific topics
Expert 1	Briefing/Seminar with training materials and points of reminders	Ethic training is easier for students to adapt the working habits/culture at the workplace	• About Personal Attitudes • About Work Etiquettes • About Teamwork and Communications
Expert 2	Case studies for discussion	Avoid serious mistakes in workplace	• About handling conflict of company interests and public interests • Laws and Regulations relevant to student's programme of studies
Expert 3	Case studies for discussion	Because the cost of learning during work is high	• About Personal Attitudes • About Teamwork and Communications • About handling conflict of company interests and public interests

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Results reported a mean score of 4.5 or above for all six ethical items. The feedback from experts also echoes with students' perception that both groups reported higher scores in the aspects of personal attitudes and interpersonal relationships. All the experts agreed on the importance of ethics training with reasons similar to two of the themes mentioned in the students' questionnaires. However, two of the three experts believe that ethics training may help students to avoid serious mistake (or high cost of committing mistake) in work, whereas fewer respondents (10.9%) related "ethics education" to "avoid violating the laws, or to avoid mistakes". This finding indicated the need to remind students about the high cost of unethical behavior in the workplace. Among three expert members, two experts believe that the use of case studies is a more effective approach for ethics education. The expert panel was also asked to select the ethical topics to be included in the ethics training programme, and results indicated that experts put a higher priority on topics of personal attitudes, teamwork and communication, and handling conflict of company interests and public interests. Students' perceptions on ethics education and expert panels were summarized below.

Table 5: Comparison of Students' Perceptions and Experts' Opinions

	Students' perception	Experts' comments	Remarks on the comparison
Six Ethical Dimensions	In general, students indicated high training needs on all 6 ethical dimensions (mean score of 5 or above for all 6 dimensions) Higher mean scores on personal attitudes (mean score: 5.64), and interpersonal relationship (mean score: 5.7) Lower mean score: anti-discrimination (mean score: 5.15)	In general, experts indicated high training needs on all 6 ethical dimensions (mean scores ranging from 4.6-6.7 for 6 dimensions) Higher mean scores on personal attitudes (mean score: 6.67), and interpersonal relationship (mean score: 6) Lower mean score: anti-discrimination (mean score: 4.67)	Similar perceptions from students and expert panels. High needs on all 6 dimensions Top two dimensions with higher training needs: Personal attitudes, and interpersonal relationship
Effective Ethics Education Approach	Preferred approach(es): case studies for discussion (36.4%), and ethics learning activities (32.7%)	Preferred approach(es): case studies for discussion	Both groups believed case studies for discussion as the most effective ethics education approach

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Training needs on specific ethics topics/specific topics to be included in ethics education programme	Higher training needs on specific topics: Work Etiquettes Handling Conflict of Company Interests and Public Interests	Higher training needs on specific topics: personal attitudes, teamwork and communication, and handling conflict of company interests and public interests	Both groups indicated high needs on the topics about handling conflict of company interests and public interests

Discussion

Research findings provide more understanding of the four main objectives of this study. First, students revealed high education needs on personal attitudes, interpersonal skills, teamwork, anti-discrimination, responsibilities to stakeholders, and code of ethics in professionals. This finding on students' perceptions is also consistent with the expert panel opinion. This finding set the direction for constructing an ethics development framework. All student respondents and experts' panel agreed that ethics education is important for career development. The open-ended question about the importance of ethics education pointed out that "ethics as essential personal attributes" and "ethics is related to decision making at work and work performance" are two of the main themes in students' mind. This finding provides insights for designing promotional messages that are more appealing to students for enhancing their participation in ethical education activities. Experts' feedback on this open-ended question part suggests that students should be more aware of the negative consequence and the high costs of committing mistakes in the workplace.

Second, this research also gathered feedback from students and an expert panel reading the pedagogy for ethics education. Results showed that case studies and ethical learning activities such as role-plays should be considered as part of the education approaches for ethics learning. This research further explores the specific ethics topics for the implementation of the ethics training programme. The third main finding of the

research suggests that personal attitudes, work etiquettes, interpersonal relationships, and handling conflict between company and public interests are topics with higher priority for ethics education programme.

Limitations and Conclusion

This research attempted to explore students' perceptions on ethics content for constructing an ethics training framework. Though the study covers students from different programmes, limited responses were received from some programmes such as IT, Engineering, Science, and Arts. More data collection can further explore perceptions among students in different programmes. This paper includes comments from experienced social workers as an expert panel. Further feedback could be collected from other stakeholders such as employers or internship partners. This research covered six ethical dimensions in the training framework and explored some specific topics such as work etiquettes and handling conflict between company and public interests. As these six dimensions cover a broad scope of ethical content, more studies are required to explore specific ethical topics for implementing ethical seminars or other learning activities under the proposed ethical training framework. Regarding the pedagogy for ethics education, the findings suggest case studies and ethics learning activities such as role-play are perceived as a more effective approach from students' perspectives. However, this research did not cover discussion on the effectiveness of these approaches in relation to the nature of the topics. Further studies are needed for examining the effectiveness of these

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approaches for each of the six ethics dimensions as proposed in the ethics development framework.

Acknowledgment

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