



**APPROACHES TO LEARNING AND ETHICAL
JUDGMENT OF BUSINESS ETHICS' STUDENTS**

BY

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requirement for the degree of Master of Science
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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is threefold. The first and second objectives are to explore the approaches to learning the Business Ethics course adopted by students and to examine the relationship between learning approaches and academic performance in respect of the Business Ethics course. The third objective is to examine the factors that affect the ethical judgment of the students. A questionnaire survey was administered to 209 students taking a Business Ethics course in a higher learning institution in Malaysia. The Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST) was used to assess the learning approaches adopted by students, whilst the study used the Business Ethics Final Examination result to measure the academic performance of the students. Ethical vignettes obtained from Emerson and Conroy (2004) were used to capture how students evaluate the ethical behaviour depicted in the vignettes. For the first objective, the results indicate that the majority of students, both male and female groups, prefer to use a deep approach in studying Business Ethics and there is no significant difference in the approaches to learning adopted between male and female groups. For the second objective, the findings reveal that there were significant positive relationships between the deep and strategic approaches and the final examination, while a significant negative relationship was found between the surface approach and the final examination result. For the third objective, it was found that Business Ethics result and year of study were factors that have a significant effect on the ethical judgment of students. In terms of theoretical implications, this study contributes to the literature on approaches to learning by using ASSIST, as, to date, not many studies use ASSIST to measure the approaches of students to learning. In terms of practical implications, this study may provide guidance to educators to adopt effective teaching strategies to improve student learning by encouraging the right approaches to learning in order to improve the academic performance of students. This study may also assist accounting practitioners and future employers in recruiting prospective employees, as factors, such as Business Ethics result and year of study have a significant impact on the ethical judgment of students. Employers may want to emphasize these two factors in the process of hiring future employees to ensure that the employees they employ have an appropriate level of moral reasoning and ethical behaviour.

خلاصة البحث

ترمي هذه الدراسة إلى تحقيق ثلاثة أهداف، الهدفان الأول والثاني يأتيان لمعرفة مدخل تعلّم المادة التي تمّ اختيارها من قبل الطلاب، وهي أخلاقيات الأعمال التجارية، و من ثَمَّ مناقشة العلاقة بين المدخل التعليمي، والأداء الأكاديمي لأخلاقيات العمل التجاري. أمّا الهدف الثالث لهذه الدراسة فيبحث العوامل التي تؤثر في الحكم الأخلاقي للطلاب. وتم توزيع استبانة على 209 طالباً يدرسون مادة الأخلاقيات في الأعمال التجارية في إحدى معاهد التعليم العالي بماليزيا، وتمّ كذلك استخدام قائمة المهارات الدراسية ومدخل التعلم لتحديد مدخل التعلّم التي استخدمها الطلاب في هذه المادة. وفي نفس الوقت تمّ استخدام نتيجة الامتحان الأخير مادة أخلاقيات الأعمال التجارية لقياس الأداء الأكاديمي للطلاب. وتم استخلاص بعض إفادات الأخلاق المهنية من إميرسون (Emerson) 2004م، وكونوري (Conroy) 2004م، واستخدامها لمعرفة كيف يُقوّم الطلاب السلوك الأخلاقي في هذه الإفادات المنقولة. وأظهرت النتائج بالنسبة للهدف الأول أن غالبية الطلاب ذكوراً وإناثاً يُفضّلون إنتهاج منهج عميق في دراسة أخلاقيات الأعمال التجارية، و لا توجد كذلك فروق ذات دلالة في اختيار المدخل لدراسة أخلاقيات الأعمال التجارية بين مجموعات الذكور والإناث. وأظهرت النتائج بالنسبة للهدف الثاني أنّ هناك علاقة إيجابية واضحة بين عمق المنهج والاختبارات النهائية، بينما توجد علاقة سالبة بين نتائج الامتحانات النهائية والمنهج غير العميقة. أمّا بخصوص الهدف الثالث فقد اتضح أن نتيجة امتحان مادة أخلاقيات الأعمال التجارية، والسنة الدراسية هما العاملان المؤثران في الحكم الأخلاقي للطلاب. و في إطار التضمينات النظرية فإن هذه الدراسة ساهمت في أدبيات التعلم وذلك باستخدام قائمة المهارات الدراسية ومدخل التعلم، حيث استخدمت هذه القائمة حتى الآن دراسات محدودة لقياس مستوى التعلم عند الطلاب. أمّا من حيث التطبيقات العملية فإنّ هذه الدراسة قد تسوق إرشادات للموجهين لتبني استراتيجيات تعليمية فاعلة لتحسين تعلّم الطلاب، و يكون ذلك بتقديم المنهج الصحيح للتعلّم، لأجل تطوير الأداء الأكاديمي للطلاب. وقد تساعد نتائج هذه الدراسة كذلك المحاسبين المهنيين، وأصحاب العمل في توظيف العاملين المأمولين، و بما أنّ نتيجة أخلاقيات الأعمال التجارية، و سنة الدراسة، لهما أثر في حكم الطلاب على أخلاقيات الأعمال التجارية، فإنّ أصحاب العمل يودون التأكد من وجود هاتين الحقيقتين في إجراءات التوظيف المستقبلية ليضمنوا أن الموظفين الجدد يتمتعون بمنطق أخلاقي مقبول، وسلوك حسن.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Science in Accounting

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Zaza Eliza binti Mohd. Redza

Signature.....

Date.....

INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

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BUSINESS ETHICS' STUDENTS**

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AACSB	American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business
ASI	Approaches to Studying Inventory
ASSIST	Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students
CAM	Continuous Assessment Mark
CGPA	Cumulative Grade Point Average
ENM	Economics and Management Sciences
e.g.	(<i>exempligrantia</i>): for example
et al.	(<i>et alia</i>): and others
etc.	(<i>et cetera</i>): and others
Final exam	Final Examination
GPA	Grade Point Average
i.e.	(<i>id est</i>): that is
IIUM	International Islamic University Malaysia
KENMS	Kulliyyah of Economics and Management Sciences
MBA	Master in Business Administration
NZ	New Zealand
RASI	Revised Approaches to Study Inventory
SD	Standard Deviation
SPQ	Study Processes Questionnaire
SPSS	Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
VIF	Variance Inflation Factor

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Ethic refers to ‘a set of moral principles directed at enhancing societal well-being’ (Frankena, 1973). This set of moral rules and principles govern the welfare of the society. Ethics, which is often related to moral conduct, plays an important role in the lives of individuals, as well as in society and professions. The credibility of many professions including accounting, engineering and medical are essentially reflected by the ethical conduct and behaviour of members of the profession.

The severe negative impact on the professions due to an increasing number of reported corporate scandals, such as Enron in the United States, WorldCom and Tyco in Europe and Transmile in Malaysia, have caused concern among various parties, which has led to their increasing attention on issues relating to ethics (Adkins and Radtke, 2004). In the higher educational institutions the importance of ethics education has been emphasised and the teaching of ethics has been revised. According to Gandz and Hayes (1988), business schools must play their role in contributing to the ethical development of students by introducing ethics courses in their curricula. Furthermore, McPhail (2001) suggested that business ethics content should attempt to develop a sense of moral sympathy and empathy for others among the students. More importantly, as highlighted by Felton and Sims (2005), it is crucial that business schools play a proactive role to instil ethical behaviour among students, and, one such medium for developing individuals with morally ethical behaviour is the Business Ethics course.

At many higher learning institutions, including the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), the Business Ethics course was introduced with the ultimate aim of instilling students with ethical values, which, in turn, would enable them to make ethical business decisions. According to Biggs (1979), in achieving a positive output from learning, the process (i.e., learning approach) of acquiring the knowledge must be right. Hence, it is important to focus on the way students learn the Business Ethics course. More importantly, earlier research found that learning approaches adopted by students are related to their academic performance. In particular, evidence from a number of prior studies found that students who adopt deep and strategic approaches to learning have higher academic performance, while students who adopt a surface approach have lower performance (Booth, Luckett and Mladenovic, 1999).

In addition, there are a number of factors that could influence the ethical decisions of students. A Behavioral Model of Ethical and Unethical Decision Making identified individual attributes as one of the factors that could have an effect on ethical decision making. In light of the above, this present study intends to investigate the learning approaches adopted by students in studying the Business Ethics course and to examine the relationships between the learning approaches and the examination results of students in the subject. This study also proposes to evaluate factors that may affect the ethical judgment of students particularly those who are taking Business Ethics course.

1.2 MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

Based on the above discussion, there are three factors that motivate the researcher to undertake this present study. First, this research is to examine how the students learn the subject of Business Ethics (i.e., the learning approaches adopted by the students). As the course aims to instil students with an understanding of ethical issues and to inculcate good ethical behaviour among the students, it is important to assess the students' approaches to learning to ensure that the aims of the course are achieved.

Second, in the post-Enron era, various initiatives and actions have been taken by various parties to enhance ethical awareness among individuals and professionals. This research comes from the motivation to assess the ethical judgment of students who have taken the Business Ethics course. Higher education institutions have put considerable effort into increasing the ethical judgment of the students through the teaching of ethics courses. The efforts of the academicians are considered worthwhile if the ethical judgment of the students improve through learning the course. Otherwise, more effort is needed to improve the ethical judgment of students.

Third, prior studies reported mixed findings on the factors that affect ethical judgment. This motivates the researcher to undertake a study to examine the ethical judgment determinants of students taking Business Ethics course. By knowing the significant factors that affect the ethical judgment of students, this would form positive expectation of potential employers on their future employees. For example, if gender is evidenced to have significant effect on students' ethical judgment, then employers may need to consider recruiting more employees from the gender that is evidenced to have higher ethical judgment.

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Generally, this study focuses on learning approaches and ethical judgment of students taking the Business Ethics course. Specifically, this study intends to identify the learning approaches adopted by students in learning the course and to investigate the relationship between learning approaches and academic performance of the students. In addition, the study also aims to examine the factors that affect the ethical judgment of students taking the Business Ethics course. In light of the above, the three main objectives of the study are as follows:

- RO₁: To identify the learning approaches adopted by students in learning the Business Ethics course.
- RO₂: To examine the relationships between learning approaches and academic performance of Business Ethics students.
- RO₃: To examine the factors that affect the ethical judgment of the Business Ethics students.

In order to achieve these objectives, eight research questions (RQ) are raised as follows:

- RQ_{1a}: What are the learning approaches adopted by students in learning the Business Ethics subject?
- RQ_{1b}: Is there any difference in the approaches to learn between genders?
- RQ₂: What are the relationships between the learning approaches and the academic performance of the students?
- RQ_{3a}: Does academic performance (CGPA) affect the ethical judgment of the students?
- RQ_{3b}: Does Business Ethics result affect the ethical judgment of the students
- RQ_{3c}: Does academic major affect the ethical judgment of the students?

RQ_{3d}: Does gender affect the ethical judgment of the students?

RQ_{3e}: Does year of study affect the ethical judgment of the students?

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings of the study are significant in a number of ways. First, this study can provide guidance to educators to encourage students to adopt the right approach to learning the Business Ethics course. As it is evidenced that certain approaches to learning will lead to better academic performance, educators can encourage the usage of the approaches in learning the business ethics course among students. This can be carried out through the teaching method used in conducting the classes as well as in preparing questions for exercises in class and examination (Ismail, 2009). A thorough discussion of the underlying concepts and theories, demonstrations of complex problems and examination questions which includes more complex problems may also encourage students to adopt the right approach to learning (Davidson, 2002).

Second, this study can provide guidance to business and accounting educators in incorporating ethics into the curriculum. Educators must constantly improve and upgrade the course content to suit the current needs of the industry. According to Armstrong, Ketz and Owson (2003), educators must be able to decide whether certain teaching methods, such as case studies, role-playing exercises or guest lectures by business and accounting professionals are suitable for use in teaching the course. Organising ethics-related programmes, such as debates, talks and seminars on ethics, may also help to enhance the ethical judgment of students taking an ethics course (Abu Bakar et al., 2010). This is also to ensure that the students will be able to apply the knowledge in their workplace.

Third, this study can assist practitioners and employers in understanding the ethical judgment of their prospective employees as some personal characteristics may significantly affect the ethical judgment of students. By knowing the factors that have an effect on the ethical judgment of students, accounting practitioners and employers may recruit students who have a higher level of ethical judgment. This will help to improve the overall ethical awareness and behaviour in the workplace and organisation.

1.5 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

The study comprises six chapters. This chapter is the introductory part of the study. It explains the background and is followed by motivation for the study, the research objectives and the research questions and significance of the study.

Chapter Two reviews the literature on ethics, business ethics and learning approaches by students. It also reviews the literature on the learning approaches between genders and the relationship between learning approaches and students' academic performance. Then it reviews on the factors that affect the ethical judgment of the students. Finally, this chapter concludes with identifying the gap in the literature.

The emphasis of Chapter Three concerns the theoretical framework and hypothesis development of the study, which includes relevant theories that are suitable to explain the research findings. Chapter Four presents the research methodology of the study. This chapter discusses the research method, sample selection, data collection and data analysis. This chapter also explains the research framework of the study.

Chapter Five includes the discussions and analysis of the results. Finally, Chapter Six discusses the findings, limitations and contributions of the study. It also includes some suggestions for future research in the area of learning approaches and business ethics education.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews the relevant literature for the purpose of this present study, which generally covers literature on learning approaches and ethical judgment. Section 2.1 defines the terms ethics, business ethics and ethical judgment. Then, Section 2.2 explains the approaches to learning adopted by students. Section 2.3 discusses the methods to assess learning approaches. The following section, Section 2.4, reviews the empirical studies on approaches to learning and the relationship between the learning approaches and academic performance of students, while Section 2.5 reviews the empirical studies on the ethical judgment of students. Section 2.6 reviews the empirical studies assessing factors that affect the ethical judgment of students. Section 2.7 identifies the gaps in the literature, and finally, Section 2.8 summarises the chapter.

2.1 ETHICS, BUSINESS ETHICS AND ETHICAL JUDGMENT

Frankena (1973) defined ethics as ‘a set of moral principles directed at enhancing societal well-being’. Ethics has also been defined as ‘the study of standards of conduct and moral judgment’ and as a ‘reflection on the moral significance of human action’ (Gandz and Hayes, 1988). Ethics consists of rules to control and guide the behaviour of a person or society. In other words, ethics differentiates the moral conduct and behaviour of a person or society from what is wrong to what is right.

Business Ethics is ‘the study of decisions made by the individuals within organizational roles under conditions of conflicting objectives and values’ (Sturdivant, 1977). It consists of many actions and decisions taken by individuals and groups in the organisation that have an impact or consequence on everyone directly or indirectly involved with the operations of the organisation. This means that business ethics constitutes what is right and wrong, or good and bad, concerning human conduct in a business context (Shaw and Barry, 2001).

In terms of ethical judgment, it is defined as ‘the belief that a particular alternative is the most ethical alternative, which requires identifying the most ethical of available options, logically suggesting that options must be compared in some way with one another’ (Hunt and Vitell, 1986). It is considered as the choices or alternatives that a person has in order to make decisions that are ethical. It also consists of the individual’s personal evaluation of the degree to which some behaviour or course of action is ethical or unethical (Sparks and Pan, 2010).

In summary, ethics can be considered as moral conduct that governs people and society to differentiate between what is right from what is wrong, while business ethics is considered as the applied ethics of moral conduct and values in the operation of business and organisations. Ethical judgment can be understood as perceptions that some actions are considered more ethical than other alternative actions. A person that has a higher level of ethical judgment will choose to behave in a more ethical manner compared to person who has a lower level of ethical judgment.

2.2 APPROACHES TO LEARNING

The approach to learning literature is one of the most important sections in the education literature (Booth, Lockett and Mladenovic, 1999). There has been an established body of literature that discusses students' approaches to learning. A learning approach describes the way students relate to a learning task (Byrne, Flood and Willis, 2004a). It captures both their intentions regarding the task and the activities by which they address the task (Entwistle, 1997). In other words, the adoption of a particular approach to learning relates to the specific intention or motivation to learning (Ismail, 2009).

Marton and Saljo (1976) found that students could be divided into two distinct groups based on their approach to learning. The first group refers to those who adopt a deep or understanding approach to learning and the second group includes those who adopt a surface or reproduction approach to learning. In a later study, Ramsden (1979) identified a third group of students who adopt a strategic approach. In other words, as acknowledged by Duff (1999), there are three clearly identifiable approaches to learning that are deep approach, surface approach and strategic approach. Table 2.1 below provides the summary of the characteristics of the three learning approaches.

Table 2.1
Summary of Learning Approaches

<p>Deep Approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Intention to understand• Focuses on the subject content• Relates the knowledge to other relevant content• Intention to read widely• Relates studies to the work environment• Integrates the subject to their personal experiences, knowledge and interests
<p>Surface Approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Intention to complete task requirements• Intention to pass the subject• Memorises the content of the subject• Problems in relating the concepts to other relevant contents• Anxiety in coping with the demands of the course.
<p>Strategic Approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Intention to obtain the highest possible grades• Works hard to excel• Has effective organization of study and time management• Examination oriented• Based on competition and ego enhancement

Sources: Entwistle (1987), Ramsden (1992), Booth et al. (1999), DeLange and Mavondo (2004) and Hall et al. (2004)