

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS OF GRADUATE STUDENTS AND PROFESSORS IN THE NATIONAL AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF MEXICO

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Abstract

We introduce the Research Project on Professional Ethics, being carried out since 2003 in the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), and we present the final results of the empirical work. This will allow us to reflect about a training proposal for graduate students. The results are based in the answers given by 1,086 students and 719 professors of the forty graduate programs in UNAM, to the open question: "What are the five main features of being a good professional?" and to an attitude scale about professional ethics, classified in four types of competencies and 16 features.

We compare the most significant findings both between the two research subjects (graduate students and professors) as well as between the two research strategies (open question and scale) classifying them in four groups: 1) High percentages in both subjects and strategies (knowledge, responsibility and honesty), 2) Intermediate level in both subjects and strategies (professional and personal ethics, professional identity, emotional maturity and capacity to innovate and improve, 3) Differences between the two strategies in both subjects (being up to date on the advances in the field, respect and technical competencies) and 4) Low percentages in both subjects and strategies (acting according to moral principles and professional values, social commitment, interpersonal skills, team work, communication and productivity).

Keywords: Professional Ethics, Graduate Students and Professors, Mexico

Introduction

The Research Project on Professional Ethics started in 2003. The main purpose is to increase the knowledge of this field of study in reference to graduate students and professors and to write a formative proposal for professional ethics.

In 2006, other 15 Mexican higher education institutions were invited to be part of the *Interuniversity Project on Professional Ethics*. The majority of these universities used the same methodological instrument to survey graduate students and professors.

The empirical activities of the research project

To be able to study the attitudes and opinions on professional ethics, we constructed a methodological instrument that was applied in 2004 – 2005 to a sample of groups of graduate students (1086) and in 2006 – 2007 to a sample of professors (719).

All the results gathered were classified in four types of competencies: cognitive – technical, ethical, social and affective – emotional, and in 16 correspondent features.

The common part of the instrument for the two research subjects¹ is: a) the open question: "What are the five principal features of being a good professional?" and b) the attitude scale with 55 items. This common part enabled us to compare the results among students and professors and the answers to the two methodological strategies.

A brief description of the samples of graduate students and professors in UNAM

In the sample of 1086 graduate students, half were women and half were men. Most of them were very young: 13% had less than 25 years of age, 60.9% was between 25 to 35 years old, 15.4% was in the range of 36 to 45 years, 5.9% was in the age group of 46 - 55 and only 1% was older than 55. The older graduate students are from Social Sciences and Humanities and Arts. Of this sample, 15.1% was working towards a Ph.D. and the rest (84.9%) was registered in an M.A. program

In the sample of 719 professors of the forty graduate programs in UNAM there are 384 men (53.40%) and 335 women (46.59%). It is evidently not a young population, because 70.38% are part of the group of 46 to 60 years of age. The data about age is related to the academic seniority, because the highest percentage belongs to the personal with more than 30 years of service and the next two places (in a descending order) have between 21 to 25 years of service and 26 to 30. More than half the sample is in these three groups.

Regarding level of studies, 70.51% hold a Ph.D., and 24.34% a masters degree. As for employment status, 13.35% are professors working under contract to teach specific subjects. Another high percentage is that of researchers (13.07%) and professors (11.40%) holding the highest category and level in the UNAM's employment scale. The instrument was also answered by seven Emeriti Professors. The rest of the sample is dispersedly distributed in the other categories and levels.

The final results of this empirical work

As was mentioned before, all the results gathered were classified in four types of competencies and in 16 features.

a) In the cognitive-technical competencies four features were defined: knowledge, being up to date on the advances of the field, capacity to innovate and improve, and technical competencies.

b) The social competencies are: interpersonal skills, team work, communication and productivity.

c) The ethical competencies are responsibility, honesty, professional and personal ethics, social commitment, respect and acting with moral principles and professional values.

d) The affective–emotional competencies include two features: professional identity and emotional maturity.

We were able to classify all the results of these two strategies and the two research subjects in three basic groups: “high”, “medium” and “low”.

These groups were established combining two procedures:

- a) The positive answers that each of the features obtained, and
- b) A conventional separation: the first five features in the first group (high percentages), the next five features in the middle group (medium percentages) and the last six features in the low group (lower percentages).

In the comparison among students and professors and the two strategies, we had to establish a different group of classification: “features that present differences in the answers to the open question and the attitude scale”.

The principal results obtained using these criteria are:

1) *Features in a “high rank” in graduate students and professors and in the two methodological strategies*

- a) In all cases, knowledge is the feature with the highest percentage. It is not a surprising result, because it is the principal element that we all use in higher education institutions, in its different forms and activities (research, teaching, dissemination and preservation).
- b) Responsibility is the second feature in importance. It is relevant to mention that responsibility and professional competence are the two key aspects of professional ethics (Hortal, 2002). As we can see, in our empirical work both features obtained the highest percentages, just as the theory in this field of study also emphasizes.
- c) For the professors, honesty occupies the third place. For the graduate students of the sample it is in a fifth position in the open question and in a fourth in the attitude scale. These three features are in a “high rank” in both subjects. They combine significant elements from the cognitive–technical competencies and the ethical competencies.

2) *Features in a “middle rank” in graduate students and professors and in the two methodological strategies:*

- a) Professional and personal ethics occupies a third place for the students of the sample, in the open question. It goes down to a middle level in the attitude scale in the case of students and in the professors in both methodological strategies. This result is interesting because in this field of study about professional ethics, even if this feature is located mostly at an intermediate level, it was considered significant by the research subjects.
- b) Both professional identity and emotional maturity, which are the two features of the affective-emotional competencies, are clearly in an intermediate level.
- c) The feature capacity to innovate and improve is also in a middle position in the answers of students and professors.

We consider these results also important, because even if the two research subjects did not choose them in high percentages, they placed them in the middle of the range. These four features combine three types of competencies: cognitive-technical, affective-emotional and ethics.

3) *“Features that present differences in the answers to the open question and the attitude scale”:*

- a) The feature being up to date on the advances of the field presents important differences between the open question and the attitude scale. In the open question it is in a fourth position in students and professors (which would be part of the high level of answers). In

the scale it is in the twelve place in the students and the eleventh for the professors (which are part of the low level of answers).

b) Respect is also a feature that varies a lot in the answers. In the open question it is placed in the low level in the case of students (13th position) and professors (11th position). On the contrary, in the attitude scale it is in the third place in students and in the fifth in professors.

c) Technical competencies is the last feature in this fourth group. In the open question it is in the 14th place in both students and professors. In the attitude scale, on the contrary it is in the fifth place in the students and fourth in the professors.

4) *Features in a “low rank” in graduate students and professors and in the two methodological strategies*

a) Acting according to moral principles and professional values is in the lower level, except in the case of the professors in the attitude scale, where the percentage is in the middle of the range.

b) It is a critical situation that the feature related to social commitment obtained a middle position in the range in the open question and a very low percentage in the attitude scale.

All our higher education institutions proclaim the necessity to interact with the social community and one of the principles of professional ethics, “Beneficence”² (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001), is about the goods and services that each profession provides for the direct and indirect beneficiaries of the professional work.

We suppose that for the graduate programs in the knowledge area of Physics – Mathematics and Engineering in UNAM the principal objective is to train students for scientific research and that the production of scientific knowledge is the most important goal. For professions directly related to the beneficiaries of the professional work, such as Social Work and Nursing, the feature of social commitment is easy to place as the most significant aspect.

c) The four features of the social competencies, team work, productivity, communication and interpersonal skills, got the lower percentages.

We could summarize the principal empirical findings of the research project by indicating that the low percentages in two of the features of the ethical competencies (respect and social commitment) and the four features of the social competencies (team work, productivity, communication and interpersonal skills) constitute an important issue in the construction of a training proposal for this field of study.

Conclusion

We consider that: a) Professional ethics is a relevant field of study for higher education institutions, b) There is a need to teach professional ethics in an explicit way in all our university programs, c) Professional ethics is a significant research problem in all areas of knowledge, d) It is important to define different strategies in teaching professional ethics and e) In reference to the results obtained in the empirical research work, the features with the lowest percentages will be useful to plan diverse strategies for professional ethics training in our university.

References

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¹ The questionnaire given to the professors has three additional open questions. They refer to: a) values that the university should promote with students, b) values that the university should promote with professors, and c) in the professors' opinion, should a compulsory subject about professional ethics be included in the curriculum and what would be the content. The questionnaire also includes three close questions about the importance of professional ethics in the university. We asked them to give a value, from one to five, in answering the following questions: a) Do academics in our university attribute importance to professional ethics in teaching? b) How important is professional ethics in your work? c) Should the university promote professional values for all the students?.

² The other three principles are: Nonmaleficence, Autonomy and Justice (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001).