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Academic managers and ethics: A question of making the “right” decision

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***Abstract:** In recent times there has been a resurgence of interest in the study of ethics, due in part to the increasing controversies surrounding the unethical behaviour of some high profile government and corporate leaders, university academics and other professionals. In an environment characterised by shrinking resources, fierce competition for enrolments, and considerable pressure to become more highly commercialised and entrepreneurial, it is argued that university academic managers have been required to confront and resolve conflicting interests as they endeavour to balance a variety of values and expectations in their decision-making processes. In this paper we examine a model developed from the literature and empirical research based on ethical dilemmas faced by public sector managers to determine its relevance for the university context. An ethical dilemma is posed to test the efficacy of the model.*

***Keywords:** ethical dilemmas, university academic managers, decision-making model*

Introduction

The argument posed in this paper is that academic managers in universities are likely to be experiencing an intensification and proliferation of ethical dilemmas in their daily work due to the wide and far reaching reforms that have contributed to the complex, value laden organisational milieu in which they now work. We begin this paper by outlining some of the ongoing challenges that are besetting the university context. Next we provide a brief discussion on the nature of ethics and ethical dilemmas and then consider the efficacy of a model developed from the literature and research based on public sector managers to determine its applicability to university academic managers. A hypothetical case scenario that might well confront university managers is presented and tested against the model.

The context in which academics work

For the past two decades in most Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries (e.g., Brereton & Temple, 1999; OECD, 2003) there has been a dramatic restructuring of public sector

organisations in line with the values of managerialism. Central characteristics of these changes, heralding a new era in higher education have included “devolution and decentralisation; strategic planning; being ‘mission or goal driven’; dominance of private sector practices and market solutions; an outcomes focus; an emphasis on performance, efficiency and accountability (responsiveness); [and] a customer focus” (Kimber & Maddox, 2003, p.43).

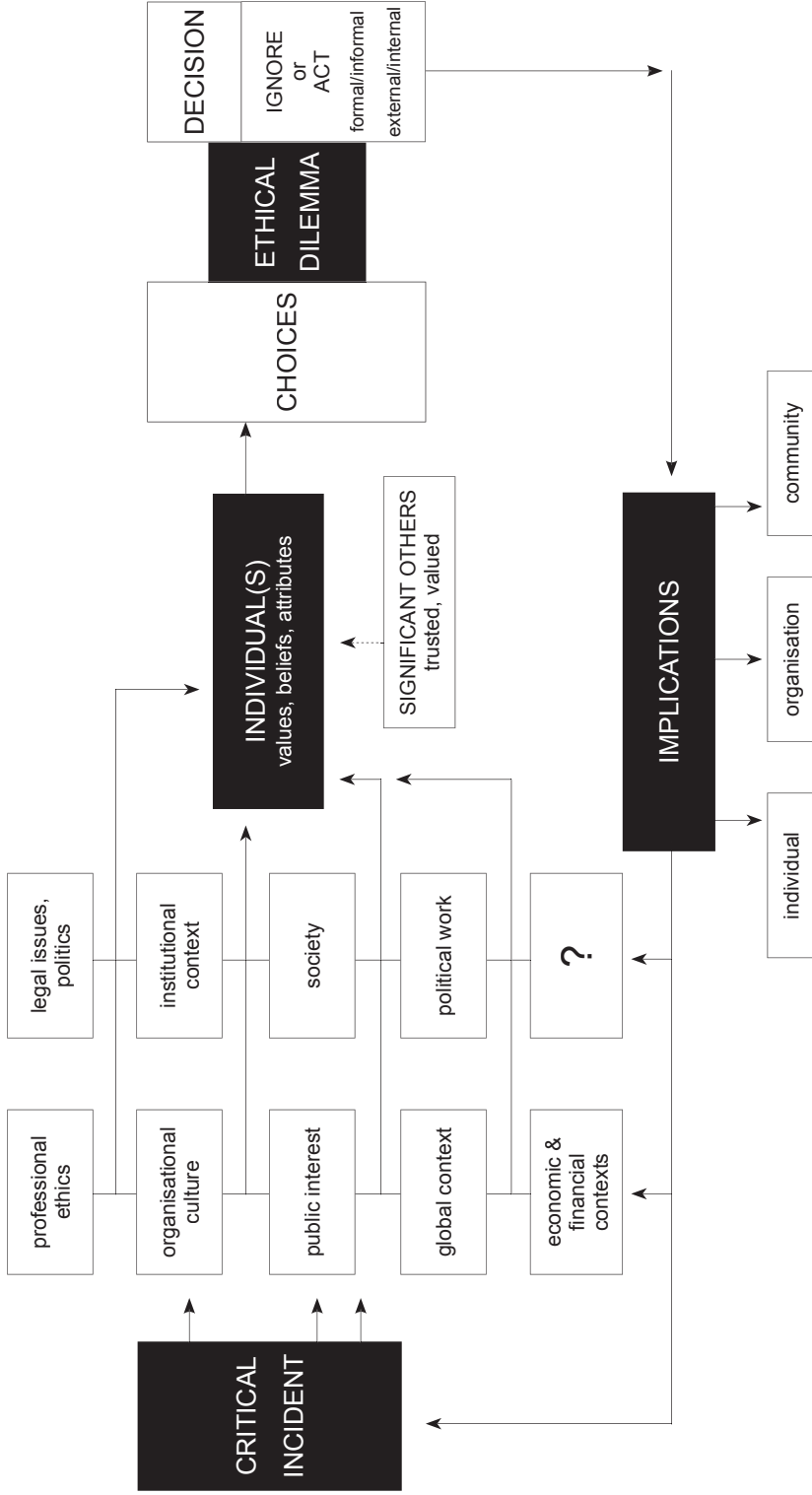
The implication of decentralisation or devolution has been that while organisations have greater control over budgets and resources, the flipside is tighter accountability measures in terms of specific outputs and outcomes (Meek & Wood, 1997). Or as Vidovich and Currie (1998, p. 207) put it, “government is ... able to use accountability mechanisms to maintain central control over the ‘products’ of universities, while leaving the details of the ‘processes’ to individual institutions”. Within the new accountability frameworks, measurement and monitoring of organisational performance has become a key feature of the changed landscape of higher education. Here performance indicators are used not only as a means of measuring academic staff and departments/faculties but also as a way of comparing universities against each other (Currie, 1998) with those universities ranked highest receiving significant rewards by the government (Vidovich & Currie, 1998).

Changes since the mid 1980s have seen an end to generous government funding of universities, increased cost cutting to operating grants and a user pays system (Dudley, 1998) of higher education fees. Increasingly, education has been viewed at the national government level not as an investment but as a cost (Marginson, 2000). In this climate of shrinking resources, universities have had to adopt commercial and entrepreneurial strategies as a means of generating more funds. Two examples of the intensified application of business practices are the commercialisation of research and the commodification of education (Currie, 1998). While the commercialisation of research has led universities to develop closer links with business and industry, the implication is that academics and academic managers have lost some of their autonomy in their quest to access funding (Vidovich & Currie, 1998). The commodification of education has resulted in a user pays system for domestic and international students alike. The selling of educational programs has contributed to high levels of competition for students (Currie, 1998) and resulted in aggressive marketing strategies employed not only in Australia but in overseas markets. This move towards more commercially driven practices begs the question of whether it is possible to achieve “a desired balance between academic and commercial objectives” (Marginson, 2000, para 20). The tension between the academic and the commercial seems to be “part and parcel” of the higher education landscape as universities grapple with ways of pursuing funding from business, industry and other bodies on the one hand, and remaining “true” to the traditional goals of higher education that involve “the creation, preservation and transmission of knowledge” (Meek & Wood, 1997, p. 13) on the other.

It is not surprising that these and other reforms to universities may well impact significantly upon the lives and work of academics and academic university managers. Some of the more negative consequences of the changes have included increasing workloads, falling morale, loss of autonomy and freedoms once enjoyed, and alienation from work (Currie & Newson, 1998; DeAngelis, 1998; Margetson, 1997). Against this backdrop of change and complexity, this paper is concerned with the ethical dimensions of the work of university academic managers.

For the purposes of the paper, university academic managers are defined as academics who occupy middle to senior management roles, rather than executive positions, such as directors of research centres, heads of schools, through to deans of faculties. We deem this group of managers particularly interesting because they are located at the interface between their school/faculty/research centre and senior executive leadership within the university. Unlike senior executive leaders such as vice-chancellors and deputy vice-chancellors who can sometimes be perceived as “partly detached from the network of institutional relations and cultural commitments below” (Marginson, 2000, para 36), middle managers

Figure 1



might be seen to be those actors who are “close” to and in constant contact with academic staff and students alike. Due to their location academic managers are accountable to those below them and those above them, and this location signals potential tension and dilemmas in their role. Their position is likely to see these managers juggling a “multitude of competing obligations and interests” (Cooper, 1998, p. 244) and being responsive to many stakeholders – not only senior executives and academics within their school, faculty or research centre, but also formal academic bodies, trade unions, students (clients or customers), government and the community. Working with a range of diverse stakeholders in a challenging operational milieu implies that these managers would be in a position to confront and resolve often conflicting forces as they endeavour to balance individual, organisational, governmental and community expectations in their decision-making. Like Whitton (1998, p. 57), we would agree that the pressures and complexities inherent in modern organisations, such as universities, are creating the conditions for ethical dilemmas to flourish. In the next sections we review some of the salient literature on ethics and ethical dilemmas, and discuss a model of ethical decision-making.

Ethics and ethical dilemmas

The meaning of ethics has been subject to considerable debate. Put simply, it requires judgement and reasoning in decision-making and it raises questions regarding what is right, wrong, good or bad conduct, fair or just. It can be described also as a “set of rules, principles or ways of thinking that guide, or claim authority to guide, the actions of a particular group” (Singer, 1994, p. 4). There appears to be general agreement in the literature that ethics is about human relationships and how we ought to relate to one another (Freakley & Burgh, 2000). In the context of universities, relationships based on trust, honesty and integrity among staff and a range of other stakeholders such as staff, students, the community and public become central. Ethical dilemmas can emerge when a person is required to make a decision that requires a choice among competing sets of principles, often in complex and value laden contexts. Difficulties might emerge when equally attractive options could be justified as “right” (Duignan & Collins, 2003; Kidder, 1995) and, conversely, when there are only equally unattractive options with equally undesirable consequences. Finding the “right” option is unlikely to be an easy feat.

A model of ethical decision-making

The model presented in Figure 1 was developed from both the literature and empirical research. Literature on ethics in the public sector (e.g., Preston, 2000, 1999; Preston & Sampford, 2002; Whitton, 1994) and educational sector (Cooper, 1998; Duignan & Collins, 2003) helped shape our thinking about the key components and forces that impact upon an individual confronted with an ethical dilemma. For example, a concept taken from Preston and Samford’s (2002) model of ethical decision-making in the public sector was the importance of “the public interest” as a potential force for interpreting the critical incident. Other key concepts that emerged from the literature that became useful for our model included the centrality of the individual who is faced with making a decision, a set of choices and options facing the individual, and the repercussions of the decision for the individual and others in the community. The model was then refined through an iterative grounded approach where we drew upon the experiences of six senior public servants who had faced ethical dilemmas in the course of their careers (Cranston, Ehrich & Kimber, 2003). Findings of this research helped to shape and fine-tune the various components of the model. For example, based on feedback from the participants, we included another component to the model. This was the addition of “significant others” (such as partners, colleagues, others) who are deemed valued and trusted and able to influence an individual facing an ethical decision.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the model consists of five interrelated parts. The first, the *critical incident* or problem, triggers for the ethical dilemma. The second is a set of competing *forces*, each of which has the capacity to illuminate the critical incident from its own particular bias or basis. The *individual* who

is faced with the challenge of resolving the problem at hand is situated at the core of the model and constitutes its third component. The *individual* is in no way neutral but brings to the dilemma his/her own values, beliefs and personal attributes that have been shaped over time by a variety of sources such as religion, socialisation, previous experience and conscience (Singer, 1993). These attributes may be influenced by the advice of significant and trusted others.

The fourth component of the model is the *choice* made by the individual among the competing alternatives. It is in considering the alternatives that *the ethical dilemma* emerges. The decision might lead to either *ignoring* the dilemma or acting in a way to resolve it. Actions can be *formal* or *informal* or *external* or *internal*. Finally, the fifth component, the action (or non-action) generates particular *implications* for the *individual* concerned, for the employing *organisation* and for the *community* as a whole. Also illustrated in the diagram is that the implications of the decision could continue beyond the individual, organisation and community and could generate new critical incidents, dilemmas and/or contribute to new ways of thinking about the forces involved. The section that follows provides a hypothetical case of an ethical dilemma faced by a university academic manager. The fictitious scenario is used as an illustration only.

Case scenario

Kate is a Research Centre Director within a large university that has been struggling financially in recent times. She is often the first person to receive international students' applications for post-graduate degrees. She receives a PhD application from a student in a country with whom the university has been endeavouring to develop a strong partnership. She notes that not only does the student fail to meet the requisite qualifications but her level of English proficiency is likely to be problematic in a doctoral program. Kate is also troubled by the poorly written research proposal attached to the application. As Kate is thinking about the application, she receives a call from the vice-chancellor's office. The caller informs her that the student in question comes from a very wealthy and influential family. Just recently, the student's father has given a generous donation to the university and a wing in the one of the new buildings is going to be named after him. The caller makes it clear it may well be in the interests of the university that this student should be accepted into the program. What should Kate do?

Discussion

It is assumed that Kate is the decision maker in this situation and that she finds this particular situation problematic. The *critical incident* can be summarised as admitting a student to a post-graduate program who clearly does not meet the university's entrance criteria. All of the nine *forces* described in the model seem to be at play in Kate's ethical dilemma. It is apparent that she draws upon her beliefs about ethical conduct from her experience as an academic and an academic manager, thus **professional ethics** is one of the key forces bearing upon her decision. It is likely that her professional ethics derive from strong beliefs she holds about principles of justice in the treatment of students as well as academic values regarding the distinct role of universities in developing students who can create knowledge and engage in intellectual debate. Related to her professional ethics is her belief that universities should operate and serve the **public interest**. The university has an important leadership and educative role to play in the community; thus it is incumbent on its academic managers to act in ways that would meet the expectations and needs of its community. The University's Code of Conduct developed within the **institutional context** stipulates certain expected standards of behaviour for academics and managers such as avoiding patronage and favouritism. The **society** force refers to key players, such as students and members of the wider community, who may stand to lose in some way if an unfair advantage is afforded to this student. The **economic force** is upper most in Kate's mind as she is aware of the poor financial state of the university and the need for the inclusion of more full-fee paying overseas students. The **organisational culture** is likely to play a role in this situation. The message from the vice-chancellor's

office is that, in this circumstance at least, it is acceptable for Kate to “bend the academic rules” in order to accommodate the university’s wealthy benefactor. Whether the institution has a culture and/or history of unethical behaviour is a question of some importance. The **global context** is an important factor in this scenario since globalisation is a powerful force that has shaped an array of university practices from full fee paying students to the commercialisation of research in recent decades (Currie & Newson, 1998). The **legal force** not only relates to legislation (e.g. Freedom of Information) but also what is perceived as legal and illegal behaviour of officials in the university. The **political force** is also potentially pertinent in this scenario as Kate is receiving a strong message from a prominent decision-making force in the university.

We would argue that the situation in which Kate finds herself could be described as one of multiple and conflicting values or accountabilities. There seem to be conflicts among more than one set of competing values. Possible conflicts include: (i) agreeing to the urging of the executive leadership in the university versus her own professional values and ethics; (ii) choosing to be equitable in the treatment of all students versus the need to be responsive to the economic challenges faced by the university; and (iii) abiding by university rules pertaining to student admissions versus the long term financial viability of the university. The scenario reinforces the point that academic managers do not work within a social, cultural, political or economic vacuum; the university context is highly complex and challenging.

The decision that Kate ultimately takes forms part of the ethical dilemma as she struggles to rationalise a clear “acceptable” response to the student, university, community and to herself. The actions taken subsequently or as part of the decision itself by Kate may be either formal or informal, external or internal. Ignoring the situation, an action itself, is most likely not an option as there will be an expectation to respond to the student and to the vice-chancellor’s office within the university. Some actions might include some of the following (these are examples only and the possibilities are many, complex and interrelated).

Formal action might mean following the processes and procedures outlined in the University’s manual of policies and procedures regarding entry requirements for admission of students into doctoral programs. This action would see Kate refusing the student entry into the program hence defying the advice given by the vice-chancellor’s office. An informal action in this case might involve her lobbying the vice-chancellor’s office to reconsider its position. External action might involve Kate taking the matter outside the university to seek advice and potentially action from the legal profession and/or relevant union or possibly taking the story to the media via an internal “leak”. Perhaps an internal action might be Kate devising an alternative plan of study for the student that does not compromise university entrance requirements yet, at the same time, would be a step towards helping the student achieve the desired outcome of acceptance into a PhD program in the future. Regardless of the decision Kate makes, there are certain implications for the:

Individual – if Kate were to agree to the vice-chancellor’s office directive, and this information were to be made known to her peers, her reputation as an academic manager could be compromised; if she were to seek and then take up some type of formal action (i.e. involving the union) her future promotional prospects at the university could be in jeopardy. If Kate were to follow the directive, she may have the added stress and worry that she has acted inappropriately and compromised her own sense of “rightness”. There are also likely to be stressful repercussions for the student (and her father) if she is refused entry into the program.

Organisation – the reputation of the university may be affected in the wider community if this student is accepted into the program, thus perpetuating unethical practices exhibited by similar cases in the future. In addition there may be considerable repercussions internally for the faculty and school among the

academic staff if the student is accepted.

Community – if the student is accepted and the circumstances become public, the broader community perception of the university will be one of cynicism and scepticism about the appropriate role and place of universities (in general) and the integrity of this university in particular. Clearly, the implications across the individual, the organisation and the community are not independent with considerable overlap and consequential effects occurring. In the case provided, it is anticipated that Kate would be aware of the issues identified above when she weighs up the options and eventually makes a decision.

In a changed university context where academic values and corporate values are likely to be in tension (Marginson, 2000), the chances of university academic managers following directives and not challenging the status quo appear to be greater. We say this on the strength of previous research (Cranston et al., 2003) which investigated ethical dilemmas facing retired senior public sector managers in Australia. This study documented a number of situations in which managers compromised their own sense of “rightness” because to do otherwise may have resulted in their jobs and or careers being terminated. In one of these situations, for example, one of the managers seemed to be guided by the principle of what would create the least cost to the majority of people. Although the outcome led him to compromise his professional values, he did not lose his job, he did not defy his supervisors, and, at the end of the day, he didn’t cause any embarrassment to the government (Cranston et al., 2003). Our previous study lends support to the notion that the public service is characterised by intensified politicisation (Kimber & Maddox, 2003) and the implication is that there is a greater chance of public servants choosing to give advice to ministers that they know will please them out of fear (Smith & Corbett, 1999). Although we are not suggesting that the public service and higher education contexts are identical, it seems that some forces as identified in the model, more so than others, tend to dominate other forces.

In terms of Kidder’s (1995) choices of “right versus wrong” and “right versus right”, the dilemma faced by Kate seemed to fit the “right versus wrong” category. However, as alluded to previously, it is possible that she may have been prevented from taking the “right” decision due to the possibly dire set of consequences that could emerge.

Conclusion

This paper outlines the increasingly complex and value laden work context in which academic managers now find themselves. In such an environment characterised by competing interests and demands, it is inevitable that ethical dilemmas become part of the landscape of managers’ work. By presenting a case scenario and testing it against a previously developed model of ethical decision-making for public sector managers, we showed that the model has potential for helping to illuminate dilemmas faced by university academic managers. Here, the forces at play, the decision making steps, the centrality of the individual and the inevitable consequences of possible choices made, were shown to be relevant in this case situation. Our plan for future research is to explore the efficacy of the model based on leaders and managers’ experiences within the university context. To date, our investigations have revealed that the model does have considerable applicability for illuminating both school leaders’ (Cranston, Ehrich & Kimber, 2004) and public sector leaders’ (Cranston et al., 2003) experiences of ethical dilemmas. It is anticipated that further research will help us to explore the utility of the model across other professional fields.

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