Developing ethical managers for future business roles: a qualitative study of the efficacy of "Stand-Alone" and "Embedded" University "Ethics" courses

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Abstract

Purpose – While the problem of unethical leadership is undoubtedly a global one, the urgency of generating ethical leadership to advance the development of Africa has never been more evident than it is today. The challenge for higher education in developing ethical leaders is of core importance, as it is responsible for providing the main recruiting ground of business leaders. The current paper reports findings of a qualitative study of postgraduate students' ethical development at the end of courses in business ethics aimed to enhance moral reasoning and ethical decision-making. The paper aims to ascertain whether stand-alone ethics courses are more effective than integrated ones in achieving academic ethical competency.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts an idiographic approach which aims at eliciting individual student subjective perceptions of the effects of the direct and indirect courses of ethical instruction on their moral reasoning and ethical practice. The research design broadly follows Mill's (2017) method of difference.

Findings – Findings indicate perceived differences in the relative effectiveness of stand-alone and embedded ethics courses among students but also show that most students hold positive overall evaluations of the effectiveness of the both types of ethics instruction.

Research limitations/implications – Limitations to the study include that it is cross-sectional, involves a small sample of postgraduate students and is restricted to two management courses at one institution of higher learning. Furthermore, while Mill (2017) provides a useful research design in this context, it is not able to indicate causality, as there are other possible unidentified "third variables" that may be the actual cause of student differences between embedded and stand-alone ethics courses. The study is not able to show the durability and transfer of ethical competencies into students' later working lives.

Practical implications – The study provides a useful practical educational contribution to the extant knowledge in the field in that it suggests that ethical courses aimed at giving students a moral reasoning "toolkit" for ethical decision-making are more effective when delivered in the stand-alone format, whereas practical decision-making skills are best honed by embedded business ethics courses.

Social implications – The problem of corruption in business and politics in South Africa is widely documented and has been regarded as responsible for creating a serious developmental drag on the alleviation of poverty and quality of lives of the majority of people in the country. The moral/ethical competency and behavior of future business leaders is partly the responsibility of institutions of higher learning. The study aims to find the most effective means of imparting moral awareness in postgraduate students who are likely to take up business leadership positions in their future careers.

Originality/value – The study provides useful contribution to the extant knowledge in the field in the African context in that it suggests that ethical courses aimed at giving students a moral reasoning "toolkit"

for ethical decision-making are more effective when delivered in the stand-alone format, whereas practical decision-making skills are best honed by embedded business ethics courses.

Keywords Postgraduates, Business ethics education, Stand-alone and embedded courses

Paper type Research paper

146

1. Introduction and statement of the problem

The problem of ethical leadership in business leaders is well documented and re-occurs frequently in the explanations of recent and past business crises. Recent crises include one at Volkswagen over exhaust emissions (Bond, 2017); Ford over the Kuga "inflammable car" which had senior management in denial, despite clear evidence (Moeng, 2017); and tax evasion at Deutsche Bank, which was forced to pay \$95 million to resolve a U.S. government lawsuit that accused it of tax fraud for using "insolvent" shell companies to hide significant tax liabilities from the Internal Revenue Service in 2000 (Caesar, 2016). All these are crises generated, at least partly, by unethical leadership practices.

In South Africa, there are many recent examples of corruption and fraud in government but also in private industry. An example is the fraud by the Steinhoff corporation which resulted in the money of many pensioners that had been invested in the company being completely written off in value. Cronje (2019, p. 1) writes,

> The former Chief Executive officer Markus Jooste received almost \$2.4m (roughly R34m at current exchange rates) of bonuses without required approvals in the months before the global retailer almost collapsed amid an accounting crisis. (Cronje, 2019)

Crises such as the above and many other similar ones have brought into sharp focus the need for radical and fundamental ethical transformation among members of the current business leadership elite. But ethical business leaders will not materialize out of thin air; they need development from an early age and industry must put a premium on their selection into senior management positions and not simply promote those with proven technical competencies as seems to be the case today. The core problem in this regard is whether ethical leaders can be effectively developed and how can this best be accomplished. In a recent paper, Birtch and Chiang (2014) found that ethical climate in business schools had an effect on students' unethical behavior. They found students who had positive views of their business school's ethical climate more likely to desist from involvement in unethical behavior. Clearly if ethical climate is found to be important in reducing unethical behavior, its promotion in business organizations through specific practices by current senior managers might be expected to reduce unethical acts among employees. As Birtch and Chiang (2014, p.292) put it:

> Given the pervasiveness of unethical behavior in industry, it is imperative that business schools dedicate enough resources to establish a strong ethical climate and implement appropriate ethical strategies and policies that help build students' ethical foundations and moral well-being and, ultimately, maximize the ethical potential that they carry forward with them into the workforce.

Therefore, a conclusion might be reached from this study in line with Godkin (2017) that ethical behavior in business senior management/leaders is needed to create an ethical climate in organizations which in turn will help generate ethical behavior in employees.

But how do we create ethical business leaders to create such a climate? Clearly this is something that needs to be developed and nurtured from the earliest years of individual socialization, but formal education can be an important catalyst in this process too. For example, Ketefian (2001) in a recent meta-analytical study indicates the positive effects of

education on moral reasoning and on ethical practice. If Ketefian (2001) is correct in showing that education enhances moral reasoning and ethical practice, postgraduate students could be expected to be more receptive to ethics instruction, as they represent a highly educated group of the general population.

Postgraduate students at South African Universities represent a highly educated elite destined for senior management and leadership positions in industry, so the core question is how might ethical education, particularly at tertiary level, find ways to help resolve the problem of unethical behavior in high places further down the line? (Benmelech and Frydman, 2013). And, how might the ethical education process at University level be most effectively administered? As the preface of a forthcoming book by Melé (2020) and written by the Dean of IESE Business School puts it:

> Many universities and business schools currently offer business ethics and corporate social responsibility (CSR) courses as a required subject in their programmes. Several research centres and chairs on these matters have also been endowed. Courses in business ethics are essential in order to provide students with an appropriate conceptual background, and help them discover and frame ethical issues in business, gain an understanding of the role of ethical values and moral character in leadership, reason about ethical dilemmas, and reflect on how to improve business and organizational conditions from an ethical perspective. However, courses in business ethics are not sufficient to accomplish all this. Their impact would be very minor if other core courses in the business curriculum suffered from a gaping hole where ethics ought to be. Thus, the real challenge in business education is to introduce business ethics into every area of the curriculum.

However although the forgoing comment is manifestly sensible, even where such gaping holes exist in business curricula where ethics should be integrated, there is very little empirical data on the relative efficacy of embedded versus stand-alone business ethics curricula, in presenting students with an ethical toolbox for making decisions in an effort to solve actual business ethical problems.

Postgraduate students at South African Universities represent a highly educated elite destined for senior management and leadership positions in industry and an important question is how might ethical education, particularly at tertiary level, find ways to help resolve the problem of unethical behavior in high places further down the line? (Benmelech and Frydman, 2013). And, how might the ethical education process at university level be most effectively administered? Following this, a core question the current paper focuses on is: How does instruction using "stand-alone" and "embedded" forms of instruction in business ethics affect Business Management postgraduate students' moral development in the academic situation? More specifically, the research objectives of the paper are to:

- measure the *singular* (defined as, student perceptions of each course as a means of effective ethics instruction in its own right) and comparative effectiveness of a *stand-alone* (defined as a fully dedicated program of business ethics instruction) and *embedded* course (defined as a course of ethics instruction embedded in the program of another discipline) in enhancing postgraduate student perceptions of *moral reasoning* and

- measure the *singular* and *comparative* effectiveness of stand-alone and embedded courses in enhancing postgraduate students' perceived *ethical decision-making* practice with specific real-life case study dilemmas.

In both embedded and stand-alone courses, moral reasoning is seen as being enhanced by specific ethical instruction offering specific ethical analytical tools (e.g. deontology and teleology) that can be brought to bear in findings solutions to real ethical dilemmas. Ethical decision-making practice (albeit in the classroom setting) is expected to be positively

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affected by ethical instruction that requires students to find solutions to case study examples of specific practically based, ethical dilemmas.

Although Antes *et al.* (2009) in a meta-analysis of ethics instruction effectiveness in the sciences found a middling mean effect size (*d* = 0.51, SD = 0.30) for stand-alone ethics courses which was greater than the small mean effect size of embedded ethics courses (*d*=,37, SD = 0.22), this aspect was investigated mainly regarding ethical issues in *science* and *scientific practice* and did not consider the *comparative* effects of *stand-alone* and *embedded* ethics courses. Antes *et al.*'s (2009) study also indicated only an *overall effect* in their meta-analysis of studies which adopted a wide range of research designs and methodological techniques.

Watts *et al.*'s (2017, p. 378) study considered ethics programs in the sciences, including some social sciences, but not specifically the business sciences and management (Watts *et al.*, 2017, p.357). Their meta-analysis mainly focused on establishing whether *training courses in ethics had improved over the years*. Watts *et al.*'s (2017) study made two major findings:

(1) Ethics training programs in the sciences were improving (analysis covered 2000-2016).

(2) Evidence for a decline in trainee knowledge and skills was not found.

Declines in knowledge and skills learnt in academic courses are common, but the extent to which practically applicable life skills such as solving ethical dilemmas has not been sufficiently researched to date. Watts *et al.* (2017) analysis found middling mean effect sizes for embedded (*d* = 0.44, SD = 0.08) and stand-alone ethics courses (*d* = 51, SD = 0.05), but results appear equivocal and further research, particularly using qualitative methods, is necessary.

Relatively little is known about the effects of ethically oriented education on moral reasoning and decision-making practice, and few studies have investigated these aspects in detail with the use of specifically designed embedded and stand-alone formal pedagogic courses of instruction for postgraduate students. Also, to the authors' knowledge, there has not been research available in the extant literature which measures the effects of stand-alone and embedded methods of ethical instruction in a comparative study of postgraduate students using Mill's (2017) "method of difference". This is important from the pedagogical point of view in the South African context, in so far as ethical instruction at university level is often embedded in courses dealing with another discipline, and few attempts have been made to study the comparative efficacy of such ethics courses' instructional methods from the students' point of view. The current study aims to shed light on this aspect by utilizing an interpretive methodological approach.

The paper takes the following form. The first section defines ethical leadership, which is what University courses of ethics try to instil in postgraduate students who frequently are ear-marked for leadership and senior management positions in business. The discussion focuses on its essential ingredients of effective moral reasoning and ethical decision-making. The literature review also outlines literature pertaining to the effects of education on ethical development and the relative efficacy of embedded as against stand-alone methods of ethical instruction. There then follows a section on methodology which presents a discussion of the research design, Mill's (2017) method of difference and samples used in the investigation. Next, the findings and discussion are presented. The paper ends with a conclusion section which indicates limitations of the study and presents recommendations for further research.

2. Literature review

Swaner (2005) suggests the existence of four main ingredients to ethical leadership. First is *moral sensitivity,* which is regarded as the ability to understand ethical dilemmas through empathy. The second ingredient is *moral judgment which is closely allied to moral reasoning,* defined as a facility to think (reason) morally and decide on what ought to be done to resolve specific ethical dilemmas (judgement/decision-making). The third aspect is *moral motivation,* which is regarded by Swaner (2005) as a personal commitment to moral action. The fourth ingredient of ethical leadership is *moral character,* which is seen as a courageous persistence to be ethical in situations where one is placed under collective pressure to compromise. Clearly there are distinct differences in the difficulty of learning and applying these moral ingredients effectively. Perhaps the most difficult aspect to develop in leaders through specific instructional interventions is genuine moral sensitivity; clearly, for example this would very difficult to develop in psychopaths who are nevertheless, according to certain authors at least, by no means underrepresented in the Boardrooms of top business organizations (Morse, 2004; Stevens *et al.*, 2012). This would be closely followed in difficulty in developing moral character beyond that ingrained in our biologically based tendency to conform (Morgan and Laland, 2012).

Moral judgment, effective moral reasoning and moral motivation aspects are possibly more amenable to specific ethical instructional interventions of the kind discussed in the paper, because they are clearly related to cognitive capacity and effective education. However, recent crises have shown that modern business leaders appear to have lost their moral compass. This may be because of the current over-emphasis on technical competency in business leaders to the detriment of more holistic skills. Ciulla (2014), for example, points out that the Greek idea of virtuous leadership discussed by Aristotle (1984) combines both technical ability and goodness.

The association between moral reasoning and education has been widely studied and equivocal findings have been reported, with some studies supporting and others rejecting the relationship (Silverman, 1994; Loye, 1990). However, a recent meta-analysis by Ketefian (2001) specifically investigating relationships between education, moral reasoning and ethical practice (with ethical practice and moral reasoning as dependent variables), found evidence supporting the associations. Eight studies in Ketefian's (2001) meta-analysis investigated the relationship between education and ethical practice, and five studies focused on the relationship between moral reasoning and ethical practice. The findings indicated a small to medium relationship between education and ethical practice, with an overall mean for effect sizes, $d = 0.44$, $p = 0.000$.

The study also found a small but significant relationship between moral reasoning and ethical practice (overall $r = 0.2$, $p = 0.000$). In general terms, Ketefian's (2001) study therefore suggests that education does indeed affect ethical practice and moral reasoning in a positive way, with more education being associated with higher levels of moral functioning. Moreover, findings of a recent study by Coldwell (2016) specifically dealing with this aspect lend further support to the efficacy of education in enhancing ethical awareness (defined as moral knowledge and sensitivity). For instance, Coldwell (2016) found using a pretest-posttest quasi experimental design with a sample of management postgraduate students studying a course of specific ethics instruction, that although most students had already attained a post-conventional level of moral development (Kohlberg, 1981) prior to instruction, many students showed further nuanced ethical development after instruction. Most students also held strongly ethical moral identities. Subjective student evaluations of the effectiveness of the ethics courses of instruction also suggested moral acumen development. The general implication from these studies are that specifically focused ethical

education in a group of cognitively able young persons can enhance ethical reasoning and practice. Clearly if this competency is found to be transferable from the academic situation into business careers, it could bear dividends in their future roles as industrial leaders.

As regard the efficacy of embedded vis-a-vis stand-alone courses of ethical instruction, Ritter's (2006) empirical study tested the effect of ethics training on moral awareness and reasoning in a sample of two business classes: one exposed (experimental) and one not exposed (control) to additional ethics curriculum. Findings indicated gender differences, with women in the experimental group significantly improving their moral awareness and decision-making processes. Ritter's (2006) approach was to add an extra course that dealt with ethics as a distinct curriculum which could be regarded as a "direct" course of instruction. Ryan and Bisson (2011, p.50) suggest, "Ethics instruction is something best done from within all courses yet if necessary, a stand-alone course may achieve the same results if the instruction is at the necessary level". However, no attempt was made by Ritter (2006) or Ryan and Bisson (2011) to measure student perceptions of effects of an "indirect," (embedded) course of ethical instruction, or to measure the comparative effectiveness of "indirect" and "direct" methods of instruction.

Antes *et al.* (2009, p. 379) state in their paper:

> An examination of the characteristics contributing to the relative effectiveness of instructional programs revealed that the more successful programs were conducted as seminars separate from standard curricula rather than being embedded in existing courses. Furthermore, more successful programs were case-based, interactive and allowed participants to learn and practice the application of real-world ethical decision-making skills.

Most recently, Watts *et al*.'s (2017, p. 378) researched ethics programs in the sciences and included some social sciences. Their meta-analysis focused on establishing whether training courses in ethics had improved over the years rather than specifically with the aspect of course delivery mode. However, analysis pertaining to mode of delivery (op.cit. p.369) found *similar middling mean effect* sizes for embedded ($d = 0.44$, SD = 0.08) and stand-alone ethics courses ($d = 51$, SD = 0.05). This suggested that there was little difference the effectiveness of stand-alone and embedded ethics course delivery, which ran counter to Antes *et al*.'s (2009) earlier study's findings (embedded: $d = 0.37$, SD = 0.22; stand-alone; $d = 0.51$, SD = 0.30).

3. Methodology

The study adopts an idiographic approach which aims at eliciting individual student subjective perceptions of the effects of the direct and indirect courses of ethical instruction on their moral reasoning and ethical practice. The research design broadly follows Mill's (2017) method of difference. Mill (2017) presents two major methods of induction. The first, the method of agreement Mill (2017, p. 453) describes as,

> if two or more instances of the phenomenon under investigation have only one circumstance in common the circumstance in which alone all instances agree, is the cause (or effect) of the given phenomenon

The second method Mill (2017, p. 455) describes as,

> if an instance in which the phenomenon under investigation occurs and an instance in which it does not occur, have every circumstance save one in common, that one occurring only in the former; the circumstance in which alone the two instances differ, is the effect, or cause, or a necessary part of the cause.

In the current study, the same group of postgraduate students underwent two forms of ethics instruction. One course consisted of stand-alone ethics instruction, while a second

course consisted of a course in entrepreneurship with ethics aspects embedded. The two courses occurred concurrently in the same semester and year of study. Crucially important as regard the implementation of Mill's method of difference, was that the students were the same persons in both modes of ethical instruction. This meant that a most important similarity in applying Mill's method to ascertain what might be caused by a specific difference is satisfied. We are dealing with the *same* students' perceptions of the efficacy of two modes of ethical instruction.

Both courses adopted the same basic structure consisting of case studies, group-work, individual class presentations and a written exam. The lectures were performed by a lecturer and senior lecturer in the Division who are expert in the field of business ethics and well experienced at teaching postgraduate students. Thus, perhaps the one major difference specific to the ethics courses the students encountered was that one was presented as stand-alone course while the was other embedded in the course of Advanced Entrepreneurship. Clearly, although Mill's research design cannot present the rigour of a fully fledged experimental design and is unable to provide a fully causally adequate explanation, it is able to provide plausible evidence of one. The study adopts an exploratory cross-sectional, "interpretivist" approach using qualitative techniques (Ghauri and Gronhaugh, 2010). Broom and Willis (2007) suggest that interpretivist researchers use qualitative methods that allow the researcher to, "reflect on subjective meanings and interpretations; the social and culturally embedded nature of individual experiences; and the relationship between the researcher and researched" (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, as cited in Broom and Willis, 2007, p. 25).

Student responses from the open-ended sections of the questionnaires were copied and distributed to three independent researchers involved in the study and subjected to content analysis that aimed to explore subjective understandings of the courses' effects on moral reasoning and ethical decision-making (Blumberg *et al.*, 2008). The analysis involved careful manual coding and interpretation. The raw qualitative data were initially transcribed by the leading researcher with tentative codes and themes built; these were further evaluated by incorporating analyses and interpretations of the data by three experienced University researchers. This procedure helped to ensure content validity of the themes developed. The data were analysed separately by the researchers and final consensus was reached on appropriate codes, themes and response classifications. A self-report technique was used in the study in which students reported their own subjective views. Although self-report techniques are widely used in the social sciences and have drawbacks, these have generally not been found to seriously undermine validity when used in appropriate contexts.

The questionnaires were anonymous and administered at the end of the course of instruction which meant students had little to gain by not giving truthful answers, or "socially desirable" answers aimed at impressing the lecturers concerned. Differences found in in student self-report responses to direct and indirect methods of ethical instruction indicated discriminant validity. Moreover, the fact that some responses were strongly negative indicates that the method as used in this context did not pressurise students to give socially desirable responses.

3.1 Sample
A purposive sample of 27 students (Marshall *et al.*, 2013, p. 20, recommend a sample of 15-30 interview respondents for similar qualitative studies), studying Advanced Entrepreneurship ("Advanced Studies in Entrepreneurship") and the Business Behaviour ("Advanced Studies in Managerial Decision Making and Business Behaviour") modules of the Bachelor of Commerce with Honours in Management degree at the University of the Witwatersrand.

The Advanced Entrepreneurship course "indirectly" taught ethics by embedding ethical issues in the entrepreneurial process. The Business Behavior stand-alone course "directly"

taught ethical issues in management through actively involving students in discussing business ethical dilemmas through specific case studies. Purposive sampling requires the identification of populations and settings prior to data collection (Draucker *et al.*, 2007).

Purposive sampling must be differentiated from convenience sampling; convenience sampling occurs when: "Participants are selected on the basis of accessibility." (Morse, 2007. p. 235).

However, in addition to this, as Bryman (2008) points out,

> the goal of purposive sampling was to sample participants in a strategic way, to obtain a sample appropriate for the research question and to ensure that there was a variety in the resulting sample so that participants differed from each other in terms of key characteristics.

Purposive sampling is generally used when the researcher is interested in obtaining responses from persons who are regarded as having ontologically based specific knowledge regarding the topic of research interest (Kyngäs *et al.*, 2011); in this case ethical reasoning of mostly young, postgraduate students who, in all probability, will fill business leadership positions in industry in the futures (Minors, 2013).

The sample consisted of 27 students from the two concurrent classes, 16 (59%) of whom were 25 years old or younger. Five students were aged between 32 and 45 years old, indicating a growth in the number of part-time students registered for this degree. Twelve (44%) of the students were male and 15 (55%) female. Seventeen students indicated that their home language was English, and 10 students spoke languages other than English at home, including: Setswana, Sepedi, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, Mandarin, Ndebele and Zulu. All sampling was conducted anonymously.

3.2 Measuring instruments

Biographical data requested from students who participated in the study included age to the nearest year, gender and home language (e.g. English or Zulu or Sotho etc.): The qualitative measuring instrument used open-ended questions that focused on student perceptions of the effects of the direct and indirect courses of ethical instruction on their moral reasoning and ethical decision-making. The open-ended questionnaire consisted of two items which asked students to indicate in their own words the effects the Business Behavior and Advanced Entrepreneurship courses had on their moral reasoning and ethical decision-making practice. The actual questions were as follows: "In the space provided below, please indicate in a few words effects the course in Business Behavior (Advanced Entrepreneurship) has had on your: Moral reasoning; Ethical decision-making practice".

Responses from two associated Likert-type scale items integrated in the questionnaire were also used in support of the qualitative written responses received from the students. These items asked students to indicate "the extent to which the course in Business Behavior (Advanced Entrepreneurship) you have undergone has: 1. "Improved your moral reasoning. 2. Improved your ethical practice (i.e. your ability to make ethical decisions)," with 1 being "a great deal", and 5, "not at all".

3.3 Direct and indirect courses of ethical instruction

The Business Behavior "direct" course of ethical instruction comprised a seven-week intensive series of lectures and group work involving selected case studies. Presentations of group answers to specific questions on the case studies during classes (each session lasting 3 hours or more), and a written document from each group documenting group answers in detail and compiled after each session were used in the pedagogical assessment process. Students are also required to complete individually an open book test comprising a case

study and/or a written class essay, and a formal written examination. All case studies and lectures were essentially focused on business ethics issues that embrace businesses triple bottom line (economic, social and environmental) and aimed at developing both moral reasoning and ethical decision-making practice.

The course in Advanced Entrepreneurship which constituted an indirect course of ethical instruction also comprised seven weeks of lectures, case studies, student presentations and a class test and written exam. The course weaved the ethical implications and responsibilities of entrepreneurship into the module's pedagogical material rather than treating it as a discrete area of study. Here, for instance, students were made to critically reflect on the entrepreneurial process within the South African context from an ethical perspective, whilst at the same time, exploring the different extensions and intersections of entrepreneurial discourse, such as institutional and indigenous entrepreneurship, as well as its social and sustainable dimensions.

4. Findings
The findings of the qualitative analyses for the stand-alone and integrated courses of ethical instruction are discussed in the following sub-sections. Section 4.1 discusses the findings pertaining to student responses to the perceived effects of the Advanced Entrepreneurship course on their *moral reasoning*. Sub-sections 4.3 and 4.4 present findings pertaining to students' perceptions of the effects of stand-alone and integrated ethics courses on *ethical decision-making*.

4.1 Perceived effects of Advanced Entrepreneurship on moral reasoning
The responses of students to perceived effects of indirect course of ethical instruction on their moral reasoning were analysed and three main interpretable themes emerge from the qualitative data: *increased ethical awareness*, *self-criticism of prior ethical assumptions* and a *broadening of moral reasoning*. A brief quantitative analysis reveals that there were four non-responses (one of which was unclassifiable and three student responses (11%) that indicated that nothing had been gained from the course in terms of their personal moral reasoning development.

Seven students (26%) indicated that they had gained *increased awareness of ethical issues* pertaining to entrepreneurship. For example, responses such as: "It made me look [at] entrepreneurship in a different perspective particularly when it comes to ethical issues involved in business" (Respondent 1 male, 26 years, home language: Ndebele), and "I view things holistically now, taking society and the greater impact of my actions into account" (Respondent 17, male, 34 years, home language: English).

Three students (11%) felt that the ethical aspect of the course made them more critical of their earlier ethical beliefs and assumptions. Examples of this perception can be seen in responses such as: "Made me critique the basis of my moral reasoning. Are they someone else's or my own?" (Respondent 3, female, 25 years, home language: Setswana) and "Got me to think outside the box and challenge the norm. 'According to whom?' is the question on my mind" (Respondent 4, female, 40 years, home language: English).

Ten (37%) students felt the course in Advanced Entrepreneurship had effectively broadened the base of their moral reasoning. This perception can be seen in responses such as: "Opened up my personal stance of situations in which to apply moral behaviour. My personal moral compass was reviewed" (Respondent 6, female, 22 years, home language: English), and "Help[ed] me make or justify morality or the underlying aspects of decisions – It does help me to make underlying building blocks of reasoning in entrepreneurship" (Respondent 7, male, 23 years, home language: Xitsonga). Overall, there is clearly strong support among most students for the positive effect of the course in Advanced

Entrepreneurship on their moral reasoning, particularly in relation to specifically entrepreneurial issues and concerns.

Finally, an analysis of the Likert-scale data for the Advanced Entrepreneurship course suggested that approximately 59% of the students who completed the questionnaire felt that the course had either much improved their moral reasoning or improved it a great deal. This tends to support that the overall conclusions from the qualitative responses, that the course had a positive influence on moral reasoning.

4.2 Perceived effects of Business Behaviour (stand-alone course) on moral reasoning
Interpretation of the findings of student perceptions of direct ethical instruction on their moral reasoning indicated two basic themes that could be extracted from the qualitative data. The first was, *increased ethical awareness understanding and knowledge* and the second, *self-criticism of prior ethical assumptions.*

There were eight (30%) non-responses and two responses that could not be effectively classified ("Business don't care as long as they make profit" and "Ethics and morals are better than the law" responses of Respondents 9 and 23, respectively). Nine (33%) responses could be classified under the *increased ethical awareness understanding and knowledge* theme. Examples are: "Gained the knowledge to understand that it is important for every individual in society to portray moral values and ethics" (Respondent 2, male, 24 years, home language: English). "Provided more knowledge" (Respondent 15, female, 24 years, home language: not specified) and "It made me gain a better understanding of other perspectives" (Respondent 27, male, 24 years, home language: English).

Six (22%) responses were interpreted as part of the *self-criticism of prior ethical assumptions* theme. Examples of student responses fitting under this theme are: "Expanded any moral values I previously held" (Respondent 6, female, 22 years, home language: English). "Has definitely opened my mind to think differently and to consider other factors in my decision" (Respondent 16, female, 26, home language: Sepedi). And "Has made me examine issues from both sides and made me more conscious of my actions in the ethical decision realm" (Respondent 25, male, 28 years, home language: English).

Interestingly two responses by students showed that while the stand-alone ethics course had been instructive it had not led to any specific change in moral outlook. In this regard, Respondent 11 stated, "My own moral reasoning affects how I view the course, but the course does not affect my moral reasoning" and Respondent 14 remarked, "It hasn't changed my moral reasoning but helped me identify different types of moral reasoning".

An analysis of the Likert-scale data for the Business Behavior course suggested that approximately 70% of students felt the course had "much improved" their moral reasoning or improved it "a great deal".

4.3 Summary comparisons of perceived effects of Advanced Entrepreneurship and Business Behavior on moral reasoning
The qualitative material was not designed to make a statistical analysis of comparisons between the embedded and standalone courses' effects on moral reasoning and ethical decision-making, but to obtain "thick data" for analysis. The single item Likert-type scales were designed to elicit student perceptions of the relative benefits of the course types on moral reasoning and ethical decision making and elementary statistical procedures and tests are briefly discussed later in this section. A summary of comparisons between qualitative findings for students' perceptions for embedded and stand-alone courses for moral reasoning is presented in Table 1.

		Moral reasoning: qualitative themes							
	Increased ethical awareness***			Criticism of prior ethical assumptions****			Broadening of moral reasoning*****		
Course	No.	(%)	Examples	No.	(%)	Examples	No.	(%)	Examples
Advanced Entrepreneurship (Embedded)*	7	26	"...made me look at entrepreneurship in a different perspective". "I view things holistically now".	3	11	"Got me to think outside the box" "According to whom?"	10	37	"My personal moral compass was reviewed". Helped me make or justify morality"
Business Behavior (Standal one)**	9	33	"Gained knowledge to understand that it is important for every individual in society to portray values and ethics." "Provided more knowledge".	6	22	"Has definitely opened my mind to think differently..." "Has made me examine issues from both sides".			

Notes: *Embedded course had four students non-responses/missing information/unclassifiable and three students stated that nothing had been gained from the course in terms of their moral reasoning. **Stand-alone course had eight student non-responses/missing information and two unclassifiable responses. ***Further example of students' *increased ethical awareness* response is "Expanded my moral values previously held" (Stand-alone). ****Further example of students' *criticisms of prior ethical assumptions* response is "Made me think and do things morally and not to be concerned only about myself" (Stand-alone). *****Further example of *broadening of moral reasoning* through practical applications is: "Improved reasoning behind business decisions" (Embedded)

Table 1.
Summary comparisons of qualitative findings of student perceptions of ethics courses on moral reasoning

Findings indicated in Table 1 are interesting in that the course in Advanced Entrepreneurship that occurred concurrently with Business Behaviour course, but after it in the same semester should have generated an additional theme from the content analysis. Conceptualized as "Broadening moral reasoning", the theme suggests a possible "interaction effect" between the two courses. However, the interaction effect also suggests that the impact of one course on the other is such that while the standalone course appears to have provided students with an awareness of specific moral reasoning calculus, the embedded course helped broaden and "place in practical context" such moral reasoning skills. This conclusion seems to be supported by examples of students' responses indicated under Theme 3 in Table 1.

Table 2 indicates that findings of the Likert scale for the Advanced Entrepreneurship course and Business Behaviour courses for moral reasoning.

Table 2 shows that approximately 59% and 70%, respectively, of students who completed the questionnaire, felt that the courses had either "much improved" or improved it "a great deal", which supports the conclusions from the qualitative responses that the courses had a positive influence. The higher percentage of students (70% for stand-alone and 59% for the embedded courses) who noted a greater benefit from the stand-alone course seems plausible given the more specific focus of the course on providing a "toolkit" of methods and suggests the validity of using such courses to enhance students' moral reasoning. A two by two Chi-squared test indicated that student perceptions of courses' effects on their moral reasoning were not significantly different (DF $=1$, $\chi^2 = 0.18$, $p > 0.05$).

4.4 Perceived effects of Advanced Entrepreneurship (embedded course) on ethical decision-making

Two themes were extracted from the qualitative data interpretations of the responses of students to the perceived effects of integrated course of ethical instruction on their ethical decision-making: *Awareness of the impact and consequences of ethical decision-making* and *Information and knowledge acquisition for making ethical decisions.* There were three (11%) nonresponses/missing information. Ten (37%) responses were considered part of the *Awareness of the impact and consequences of ethical decision-making* theme. Examples of actual responses classified under this theme are:

> This course has enabled me to understand the importance of ethics. If individuals in society practice good ethical decision making, this can result towards a positive impact on the functionality of society (Respondent 2, male, 24 years, home language: English), and

Type of response	Frequency		(%)		Valid (%)		Cumulative (%)	
Valid								
A great deal	*13*	11*	*48.1*	37.9*	*48.1*	40.7*	*48.1*	40.7*
Much	*6*	5*	*22.2*	17.2*	*22.2*	18.5*	*70.3*	59.3*
Some	*3*	5*	*11.1*	17.2*	*11.1*	18.5*	*81.4*	77.8*
Little	*2*	5*	*7.4*	17.2*	7.4	18.5*	*88.8*	96.3*
Not at all	*3*	1*	*11.1*	3.4*	*11.1*	3.7*	*100.0*	100.0*
Total	*27*	27*	*100.0*	100*	*100.0*	100*		

Table 2.
Summary comparisons of student responses to the Moral-Reasoning Likert-type scale

Notes: Course type**:** Italics=Stand-alone; *= Embedded

Highlighted the importance of being ethical even in seemingly "unnecessary" situations. There is ALWAYS a choice to be made, ALWAYS a way around a problem or dilemma, especially if you take an ethical stance (Respondent 6's own emphasis, female, 22 years, home language: English).

A further ten (37%) responses were classified under the *Information and knowledge acquisition for making ethical decision* theme. Examples of student responses regarded as expressing this theme are: "Helps me to make well informed decisions when [I] have the potential to make an impact. Making profit maximisation decisions based on what's wrong or right" (Respondents 7, 23 years, male, home language: Xitsonga), and "It has [given] me a broader knowledge of how to do things the right way" (Respondent 18, female, age unspecified. Home language: English). Four (11%) responses indicated that the course of indirect ethical instruction had no effect on their ethical decision-making practice.

An analysis of the Likert-scale data for the Advanced Entrepreneurship course suggested that approximately 70% of students who completed the questionnaire felt that the course had either much improved their ethical decision making or improved it a great deal. This tends to corroborate the overall conclusions from the qualitative responses, that the course had a positive influence on ethical decision making.

4.5 Perceived effects of Business Behavior (stand-alone course) on ethical decision-making
Two themes were interpreted from the extant data of student responses to the perceived effects of the stand-alone course of instruction on ethical decision-making: *Awareness of the impact and consequences of ethical decision-making* and *Information/knowledge acquisition and self-critique of prior ethical values*. There were eight (30%) non-responses/missing information. Eight (30%) responses were classified under the *information/knowledge acquisition and self-critique of prior ethical values* theme. Examples of student responses fitting under this theme are: "Made me consider what I define as ethical and also according to whom and on what basis I am defining this" (Respondent 2, male, 24 years, home language: English), and "To look at all angles rather than one favouring my point of view" (Respondent 13, female, 24 years, home language: English). Nine (33%) responses were interpreted under the *Awareness of the impact and consequences of ethical decision-making* theme; examples of student responses under this theme are: "It is important to take time to evaluate a situation carefully before making decision that may result in negative consequences" (Respondent 2, male 24 years, home language: English), and "To consider others in making decisions" (Respondent 10, male, 26 years, home language: Afrikaans). Two (7%) respondents indicated that the course hadn't changed their personal ethical values or decision-making practices. The course appeared to expose students to deeper thought about ethical values and assumptions in ethical decision-making which perhaps open them to more ethical introspection than the embedded course. An analysis of the Likert-scale data for the Business Behavior course suggested that 67% of students felt the course had "much improved" their ethical decision-making or improved it "a great deal".

4.6 Summary of comparisons of perceived effects of embedded and stand-alone courses on ethical decision-making
Table 3 shows a greater proportion of students indicated the embedded course had a more pronounced effect on their ethical decision-making (74%). This is borne out by qualitative student responses. Stand-alone course qualitative responses were knowledge-based and analytical and responses that incorporated analytical words such as "evaluate. . .consider. . . all angles". Embedded course responses appeared to be more practical and pragmatic involving words such as "ethics practice, problem or dilemma, well informed decisions, do things the right way".

| | Ethical decision-making: qualitative themes | | | | | |
| | Increased awareness of impact and consequences of ethical decision-making[***] | | | Information and knowledge acquisition for making ethical decisions[****] | | |
Course	No.	(%)	Examples	No.	(%)	Examples
Advanced Entrepreneurship (Embedded)[*]	10	37	"Course enabled me to understand the the importance of ethics… practice good decision-making …positive impact on functionality of society."	10	37	"Helps me to make well informed decisions"
			"…ALWAYS a way round a problem or dilemma, especially if you take an ethical stance"			"It has given me a broader knowledge on how to do things the right way"
Business Behavior (Stand-alone)[**]	9	33	"It is important to evaluate a situation carefully before making a decision" "To consider others in making decisions"	8	30	"Made me consider what I define as ethical …according to whom on what basis" "to look at all angles rather than favouring my point of view"

Table 3.
Summary comparisons of qualitative findings of student perceptions of courses on ethical decision-making

Notes: [*]Embedded course had three student non-responses/missing information and four students stated that nothing had been gained from the course in terms of their ethical decision-making. [**]Stand-alone course had eight student non-responses/missing information and two students stated that nothing had been gained from the course in terms of ethical decision-making. [***]Further example of student's response of increased ethical awareness of impact and consequences of ethical decision-making is: "To be emphatic, listen and be alert when making ethical decisions and how they can negatively or positively impact on others" (Embedded). [****]Further example of student response of *information and knowledge acquisition for making ethical decisions* is: "Knowledge acquisition but no major applications yet"

The findings again indicate that although one course impacted on the other interactively, student responses suggest they served different functions, with the standalone course providing the moral toolkit and the embedded course providing the practical forum for their application in ethical decision-making practice (Table 4).

Analysis of the Likert scale data for the stand-alone course suggested that 67% of the students felt that the course had either much improved their ethical decision-making or improved it a great deal. This supports the overall conclusions from the qualitative responses, that the course had a positive influence on ethical decision-making. Again, it is interesting to compare the differential proportions of student perceptions of the course of embedded and stand-alone ethical instruction on ethical decision-making. Here the embedded course appeared to have a more pronounced positive effect for 70% of students. This seems plausible given that the indirect course dealt with ethical aspects of entrepreneurship decision-making and was focused on ethical decision-making in a specific life context which gave it a more practical resonance than the conceptually oriented stand-alone course.

A two by two chi-squared test indicated that student perceptions of direct and indirect courses' effects on their ethical decision-making were not significantly different (DF = 1, $\chi^2 = 0.13, p > 0.05$)

5. Discussion of the findings

The findings suggest a generally positive effect of both embedded and stand-alone forms of ethical instruction on postgraduate students' moral reasoning and decision-making in line with Watts *et al.*'s (2017) study. Also, in line with Watts *et al.* (2017), but contrary to Antes *et al.* (2009) study there appeared to be no substantive differences in the effectiveness of these two types of ethical instruction, although the stand-alone course evoked resistance among those students with strong pre-formulated ethical values.

Differences were also found in the proportions of students who endorsed the benefits of the two courses. It was found that more students perceived the stand-alone course as improving moral reasoning, while the embedded course that concretized ethical decision-making in the entrepreneurial context, was regarded by a greater proportion of students as being more effective in ethical decision-making practice. These findings seem plausible given the more conceptually oriented stand-alone course and the more practically oriented embedded offering. There also appeared to be some evidence for greater questioning of prior ethical values and standpoints after the stand-alone course which seems plausible given the distinct foci and purpose of the two courses. In general terms, the findings support Ketefian's (2001) and Coldwell's (2016) earlier analyses that moral education can prove beneficial in enhancing moral awareness and reasoning among cognitively able persons.

6. Conclusion

The study has shown that both embedded and stand-alone courses of ethical instruction for postgraduate student at tertiary level are effective in enhancing ethical reasoning and decision making. The application of Mill's (2017) method of difference suggested that the only essential major differences between the courses of ethical instruction was that one was embedded and the other stand-alone in presentation. The students who reported their perceptions of both ethics course modules were identical, the content of the ethics dilemmas were all business focused, the courses occurred concurrently, the structure of both courses was similar and both lecturers involved were equally experienced in the delivery of their respective modules. However, there appears to be evidence of an interaction effect, possibly afforded by the proximity of the courses' lecture times.

Type of response	Frequency		(%)		Valid (%)		Cumulative (%)	
Valid								
A great deal	12	8*	*44.4*	27.6*	*44.4*	29.6*	*44.4*	29.6*
Much	*6*	11*	*22.2*	37.9*	*22.2*	40.7*	*66.6*	70.4*
Some	*4*	4*	*14.8*	13.8*	*14,8*	14.8*	*81.5*	85.2*
Little	*4*	1*	*14.8*	3.4*	*14.8*	3.7*	96.3	88.9*
Not at all	*1*	3*	*3.7*	10.3*	*10.3*	11.1*	*100.0*	100.0*
Total	*27*	27*	*100.0*	100*	*100.0*	100*		

Notes: Course type: Italics = Stand-alone; * = Embedded

Table 4.
Summary comparison of student responses to the Ethical Decision-Making Likert-type scale

www.

The findings show in line with Watts *et al.* (2017) that that both types of course delivery were effective in enhancing postgraduate student perceptions of their ethical competency. However, the findings of the study go beyond those of earlier studies in so far as the research design allowed a more detailed comparison of course delivery effects on ethical learning and the qualitative methodology brought out specific nuances in the focus of the specific ethical courses. It was found, on the one hand, that ethical issues in the embedded course (entrepreneurship) were viewed by students as being more effective in enhancing *practical ethical decision-making*. On the other hand, the stand-alone course, which was more theoretically oriented, was regarded by students as being more effective in enhancing *moral reasoning*. This is a tentatively useful contribution to the extant knowledge in that it suggests that ethical courses aimed at giving students a moral reasoning "toolkit" for ethical decision-making may be more effective when delivered in the stand-alone format, whereas practical decision-making ethical skills are best honed by embedded courses. However, it must be emphasised that the study's focus is on *students' perceptions* and can only report on students' subjective feelings about each type of course delivery. Also, the qualitative sample is small, although considered fully representative and acceptable for qualitative analysis (Bertaux, 1981, state the smallest acceptable sample for qualitative research is 15 and Marshall *et al.*, 2013, indicate 15-30 respondents for qualitative interview studies), and a formal experimental design was not considered appropriate for the single sample comparison used. Limitations to the study include that it is cross-sectional, involves a small sample of postgraduate students and is restricted to two management courses at one institution of higher learning. Furthermore, while Mill (2017) provides a useful research design in this context, it is not able to indicate causality as other possible unidentified "third variables" may be found to be more salient in explaining student perceptions of differences in ethical courses.

Also, there was evidence of an interaction effect making analysis of the effects of course difference more complicated. However, this limitation was counterbalanced by the research design which was aimed to allow the *comparison of course effects*, *sui juris*, to be measured more accurately. We maintain that the benefits of a single-sample-same-respondents comparative analysis using the method of difference would not have been possible using different samples of students for the two courses, nor would a randomized treatment/control group experimental design have been effective for making such an analysis.

A further limitation is that there can be no substantive conclusion from the findings that relatively short ethical courses are able to *durably* enhance students' moral reasoning and ethical decision-making and equip them to transfer these competencies into their later working lives.

However, the tentative findings of the study have encouraged the authors to continue with the stand-alone and embedded course deliveries in the school, as they appear to have been effective in their respective pedagogical objectives. Advanced Entrepreneurship has continued its emphasis on "embedding" aspects of ethics in all sessions, and engaging students critically with the implications and application of ethics in various entrepreneurial scenarios. Business Behaviour continues with its emphasis of providing students with a "stand-alone" theoretical ethical toolkit. Further, largely qualitative data are being accumulated longitudinally with each annual intake of students to ascertain the trustworthiness and reliability of the current study's findings.

It is recommended that longitudinal research will also focus on interview surveys of students who have undergone ethical instruction at University and involve questioning the efficacy of such courses in terms of conceptual skills learnt and practical utility in solving ethical problems at work. To enhance the reliability and trustworthiness (validity) of qualitative small-sample research (and accumulate larger samples for basic quantitative analysis), repeat studies of University students perceptions should be conducted to build a

substantive data resource that might aid higher educational institutions in deciding on the utility and relative effectiveness of stand-alone and embedded post graduate ethical instruction.

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