



Why learn business ethics?—Students' conceptions of the use and exchange value of applied business ethics

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Abstract

Applied Business Ethics is a core module for business undergraduate students in an internationalised university business degree programme from the United Kingdom (UK) taught at a Private Higher Education Institution (PHEI) in Singapore. Students, who are working adults undertaking this part-time degree, are assessed purely on the application of theoretical knowledge through essays that show evidence of their ability to apply theory in workplace ethical dilemmas. This pilot study explores the utility of the module in terms of use and exchange value. It was conducted in two phases as an empirical qualitative research. First, an email survey was sent to students, who had already graduated, to gather impressions of the module using open-ended questions. Based on the responses, semi-structured interviews of a purposive sample of four students were carried out to unearth insights on use and exchange value of the module through their stories. The study suggests that a key determinant of use value is workplace utility of the knowledge that has been gained. Over time, consistent derivation of use value translates to exchange value as long-term behaviour changes in the individual create positive workplace outcomes. The study also recognised the powerful influence of organisational culture in determining whether ethical thinking translates into ethical action, which also has a direct bearing on perceptions of use and exchange value. The findings of this study provide an insight to the understanding of the motivations of working adults attending the Applied Business Ethics module on a part-time basis. Having this understanding, it will be possible to further structure the module, in terms of positioning, delivery and assessment, to enable these students to become better managers when dealing with real-world workplace ethical issues.

Keywords Applied business ethics · Use value · Exchange value · Organisational culture

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