

## Factors Influencing Professional Ethics Development in Virtual Education

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### **Abstract**

*Ethic is a reflection and mirror image of dominant values in organizational activities and responsibilities. The present study investigates the experience and viewpoints of faculty members of Payam-e-Noor University of Kerman regarding the factors that may influence professional behavior at the stable virtual university. The study analyses the contents of the interviews of 14 faculty members the departments of Basic Sciences, Vocational-Engineering, Literature and Humanities at Payam-e-Noor University of Kerman in September, 2013. The collected data were analyzed thematically. The findings of this study confirm ten minor and three shading themes: background factors, structural factors, and contextual factors. Further, this study specifies the factors that may influence on the development of professional ethic. Finally, based on the findings appropriate recommendations are given to the authorities responsible for higher education*

**Keywords:** ethics, culture, values, cooperation, structure, environment.

## Introduction

Education, learning, and its patterns have changed proportionally historical evolution and time course (Alipour, 2008). Open and distance learning is accepted as a powerful tool in social and economic development and becomes an essential element in education system both in developed and developing countries. The growth of information technologies has given birth to new, technology oriented teaching methods. The traditional techniques have been replaced by modern techniques. Electronic learning environments make learners more active and energetic creating friendly environment for students.

Web is introduced by technologies such as blog, moblog, podcast, vodcast, RSS, wiki and social networking (Fotouhi, 2008). However, in addition to advantages internet also brings forward a number of ethical issues. Lack of ethics in organizations and universities causes misbehavior of managers, depression in students, job dissatisfaction, burnout, increase in individual rather than public interests, and violation of students' rights (Mirkamali, 2003).

Experts define professional ethics a sense of identity with a profession, the need for continuity in a job, and sense of high responsibility towards job (Abtahi, 2006). Besides knowledge transfer, there are other tasks in universities, which have social and scientific values and are categorized as higher education duties (Iranian E-Institute of Higher Education, 2008).

Research conducted on professional ethics focuses more on technical than organization and human issues (Kaisler et al, 2005). In Iran, this issue has started to attract attention in recent decade

(Shirmohammadi, 2010). Special education system of Payam-e-Noor University in decision-making is mainly based on centralized methods. This university is different from other universities in terms of professional ethics. This university is a kind of stable virtual organization, and in fact there is a central part in this organization, which specifies essential rules for cooperation of different parts (Luis, 2005).

The goal of the present study is to identify and categorize the factors effective for the development of professional ethics in stable virtual universities based on the case of Payam-e-Noor university.

## Methodology

Thematic analyses have been applied to identify the effective factors for the development of professional ethics among faculty members. To explain the professional ethics from faculty members' points of view, the qualitative content analysis was carried out. Each professor has been interviewed in his/her office using purposive sampling. 11 faculty members of science, engineering and technology, humanities were interviewed. At the beginning, participants were asked to explain the "professional ethics" term. Then, they explained their experience and perception of this term. They were asked, for example, to give an example of professional ethics, which affected their function, or to name the factors that have developed their professional ethics. The interviews were recorded and, then converted and used as main data of the study. Each interview took an hour on average. After each interview, the records were coded. The coding consisted of three

stages: open, axial and selective coding. First, the text of each interview was studied several times and main sentences were recorded as codes in open coding stage. Second, the codes with the same concept were put in the same category. Then, the same items were merged and the

related categories were put around shared axial.. Finally, the selective coding was done and the core variables were selected focusing on the most repeated variable (Streubert, 2003). The collected data were further extracted.

**Data Analysis and Results**

**Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants**

Faculty			Executive Position		Kind Of Employment			Gender		Age		Demographic Characteristics
Sciences	Engineering	Humanities	Consultant	Manager	Tenure	Temporary	Contractual	Male	Female	25-35	35-45	
3	4	4	2	9	5	3	3	6	5	3	8	Frequency

**Table 2. Categorizing shading and minor themes**

Minor themes	Shading themes	No.
One's past professional mission	Contextual factors	1
Organizational environment participation and cooperation, organizational culture	Background factors	2
Conflict management, Line and staff contradictions, Support processes, External cooperation, Compensation and equal payments	Structural factors	3

Contextual factors of shading themes were specified by minor factors: one's past and professional mission. Participants emphasized professional mission. A participant explained his experience: "I think, mission plays an important role in professional ethics. Some of my colleagues are very responsible when they are teaching. They use class time (2 hours)

completely. It is also valid in researching. Researcher should not use fake data in article".

Background factors of shading themes with minor themes are recognized by organizational environment, organizational culture, communications and cooperation. According to a participant the main factor

for human prosperity is "his job environment".

In addition, participants mentioned the key role of culture (and its subsets) in professional ethics. They state that culture improves the professional ethics. Rewarding the moral behavior was mentioned by participants as a culture subset, it also was emphasized manager's role. A participant explained that: "everybody thinks whether the system appreciates him/her or not, whether your manager cares about your function or not. Suppose I establish a new lab, I expect them to mention my name in the reports, at least". Structural factors of shading themes were categorized by support processes, compensation system, line and staff conflicts, conflict, and external cooperation management.

Participants' experience shows that support processes are effective for professional ethics. Such processes include suitable environment and tools prepared for faculty members while often there is no personal and special place. For example, a room is only for four people, but eight people work there, which decreases teaching and researching efficiency.

Many participants emphasized the role conflict in their experiences: "The number of students increases every year, our responsibilities increase, too. Add lack of facilities and cooperation among employees to this, so we are under more stress. We should be engaged in research activities, but actually no time remains or there is no concentration or energy, any more. Accordingly, you may see non-professional ethics when we communicate with colleagues or students".

Further, the participants emphasized the role of external cooperation in professional

ethics. A participant said: "Our invited professors are several times of our faculty members. Unfortunately, they may show non-professional ethics, too. In Payam-e-Noor University, fewer classes are held. The number of professors is not enough, so we cannot substitute them. In such situation, the students are under pressure, and they become unsatisfied".

This study examined Kerman Payam-e-Noor university faculty members' experience from qualitative viewpoints. Contextual, background and structural factors were identified. Contextual factor is based on one's past and professional mission. Mr. Mazaheri asserted in his study that ethics is different from rules observation and often is accompanied with personal background (Mazaheri, 2003).

Participants also emphasized Organizational environment and culture in second aspect including background factors. Organizational culture includes organization values, norms, beliefs, and attitude (Sobhani Nejad, 2010). When faculty members accept a set of core values, they pay more attention to their responsibilities and tasks and are more committed to others, so occupational integration improves. Hamilton believes virtual organizations are successful if leaders try to create culture resulting in learning varied values, investing on them and safe communications (Hamilton, 2003).

Curry et al. found that when someone commits to high standard professional ethics, extensive job participation is made (Curry, 1989). People are impressed by organizational structure variables (Sobhani nejad, 2010). Professional ethics extensively depends on organized approach,

appropriate structural contexts, and proper cultural mechanisms (Ferasatkhah, 2006).

Structures, which enhance employees' understanding of organizational support, resulted in increase of organizational commitment. Thus,, when employees understand they are supported by organization, they feel responsible to the organization (Meyer, 2000). Compensation system and external equality observance were significant from participants' viewpoints. In organizations with high profit, attrition is less. Hozouri (2005) concluded that faculty members believed the university did not do anything special for them to encourage their commitment to work.

Complex administrative protocols and line, staff contradictions were structural themes indexes found in this study. One of the participants declared Payam-e-Noor University is "employee-driven". In addition, Ansari concluded that structure can hinder professional ethics. This includes employee -manager relationship, community and rules (Ansari ranani, 2009).

Each part of scientific society in our country is dependent on special experts. Thesis delivering process to a researching center takes time. Approving some field of study in Higher Education Development Council takes a long time, because it depends only on some special experts or employees. Education process would progress if job description was defined (Alikhani, 2010).

Zuzek (2008) concluded that when communication decreases resulting in less cooperation, managers may face difficulty in such education systems.

Participants mentioned the support process as a weakness. Researches show

scientific equipment and environment is not in a good condition (Dorri, 2008). Today, e-learning and virtual universities play a significant role in higher education system. Alikhani (2010) states physical spaces, their facilities, needed equipment, internet and other communication networks should be improved and standardized according to specified job description and the number of users. Conflict and ambiguity was another research finding. Such conflict occurs when one person should simultaneously play more than one role (Chonko, 1983). Buck and Watson (2002) recognized the role of ambiguity as a negative factor for professional ethics. Role conflict makes stress and anxiety among personnel and causes despair and discouragement to the job (Roman, 2005).

Studies indicate that stress changes behavior (ethical or unethical) (Ronins, 1996). Virtual teams have other challenges such as lack of face-to-face communication, which may result in conflict.

From participants' points of view external cooperation (employing invited professors) is effective in developing professional ethics. Public confidence is obtained through showing that university professors are members of a high standard occupation (Sobhani nejad, 2010). Thus, occupational experience plays significant role in personnel socialization process and its effectiveness (Mowday, 1982).

### **Conclusion**

Improvement of professional ethics in stable virtual education depends on a number of factors including content, contextual indicators, policies, and structures. While, culture and values play

important role in establishing ethics in organization, it is necessary to create friendly and motivating organizational environment. In addition, the structure plays significant role in establishing moral values. Therefore, structural changes such as improvement of compensation system, encouragement of equality and staff relations, establishment of support processes, conflict management system, and external cooperation may drastically contribute to the development of professional ethics.

In addition, it is suggested for the universities to pay more attention to professional mission when recruiting staff. It is also recommended for the professors to focus more on the value transmission and socialization processes, and on the planning of norms and moral values for training programs.

To enhance professional ethics hardware and software infrastructure, facilities, environment should be improved to overcome electronic cooperation obstacles. In addition, it is necessary to create a unique organizational culture, strengthen partnerships, reinforce social networks emphasizing shared vision, university goals and mission.

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