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Educating Responsible Graduates: The Role of Ethics and Values in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

Academic success, professional knowledge, and employability are often linked to higher education. Educating students for the future is more than providing technical content and job skills. Universities also play an important role in developing graduates with a strong understanding of ethics, integrity, responsibility, and accountability. A successful graduate is not just someone who knows what to do but someone who understands what should be done and why. In an evolving world shaped by technological advancements, AI globalisation, and a more complex working environment, the ability to make ethical decisions is integral to a responsible professional's role. Hence, future education should encompass responsible decision-making, ethical behaviour, and social responsibility.

Beyond Knowledge: Why Ethics Matter?

Across higher education, institutions face a critical challenge: preparing graduates who are not just technically skilled but also morally grounded and equipped to navigate complex ethical challenges in the workplace and society (Haron et al., 2023; Stekelenburg et al., 2023). Students may vary in their approach to various techniques. There will be times when a problem arises for which the right answer is unclear at the time. These are situations that illustrate the importance of ethical education. As recently shown, ethical agency is essential to student development, not just rules and punishment. Brickhill et al. (2024) found that an educative approach to academic integrity enables students to exercise agency and see integrity as part of their emerging academic identity. They recognised trust, honesty, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage as key pillars of academic integrity. This shows that ethics should not be taught as a set of rules for students to follow. Instead, students should learn the principles behind the rules and apply them in decision-making.



Beyond Rules: Building Ethics and Values

Raising responsible graduates demands that higher education institutions shift from a system that focuses primarily on rules, regulations, and punishments. Policies are important for safeguarding standards in school, but a sustained commitment to integrity is stronger when students see the value of ethical actions and slowly build this attitude into their personal values and identity (Hagège, 2023; Wan Khairuldin et al., 2025). Brickhill et al. (2024) noted that trust, honesty, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage are the fundamental values of academic integrity that offer a solid foundation for building ethical learning communities. These values also relate to Islamic values grounded in *amanah, sidq, mas'uliyyah,* and *hisbah* (Wan Khairuldin et al., 2025). In addition, Hagège (2023) noted that students' critical thinking about rules and their own choices is important. Furthermore, they should not do what they are told out of fear of repercussions. Instead, they should ask themselves: Is this action right? Whom would it impact? What are the repercussions? This reflective exercise helps

students become more personally responsible and build confidence in making ethical decisions, even when the situation is unclear.

Towards a culture of responsibility

Creating responsible graduates requires a whole-of-institution approach. No one course, one lecturer, or one unit can be held accountable for ethics. It should permeate teaching and assessment, student activities, university policies, and staff-student interactions. There are several actions that can reinforce this culture:

1. Apply academic integrity policies not only to violations but also to educate students on why integrity matters.
2. Link ethics to the curriculum by making opportunities for students to bring up ethical issues in the areas of their studies.
3. Give students opportunities to express their thinking, consider consequences, and learn from ethical dilemmas.
4. Enhance experiential learning through internships, community work and authentic case studies.
5. Engage students in discussions on academic integrity and responsible learning, and keep policies and approaches relevant to today's student context.

In this way, higher education can transcend producing graduates who know what to do and instead produce graduates with a values-based sense of purpose and the courage to act on it. Education for a better future, therefore, starts not just with what students know but also with whom they become and how they use what they know.

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