The teaching of ethics in higher education schools: The reality of a Portuguese institution

Elsa Maria Nunes Barbosa

Polytechnic Institute of Beja

School of Technology and Management

Abstract: In the last years, the world has been witnessing a succession of events resulting from misconduct by various decision-makers. This awareness has led schools to adopt in their curricula subjects with content in the area of ethics and similar. With the present research, on the one hand, it was tried to verify whether the teaching of ethics is present as a discipline in the courses taught in institutions of higher education. On the other hand, it is also intended to verify the expressiveness of the discipline of ethics in the curricula of the courses, in comparison with other disciplines that are taught in those courses. The present study focused on a Portuguese higher education institution, and the data collection was carried out with resources to the technique of content analysis. The results allow us to infer that the expressiveness of the teaching of ethics is reduced, being the teaching of the discipline, within each course, oriented to the area of professional ethics.

Key words: ethics, teaching, higher education, expressiveness

1. Introduction

There is growing recognition that good ethics can have a long-term positive economic impact on the performance of firms, that is of strategic significance to the company's management. Many statistics support the premise that ethics, values, integrity and responsibility are required in the modern workplace. For consumer groups and society at large, research has shown that good ethics is good business (Joyner and Payne, 2002). During the last decade, highly publicized incidents of business misconduct have occurred in virtually every major industrial economy. These scandals have played a critical role in increasing public, business, and academic awareness of issues of business ethics throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia (Vogel, 1992).

Solomon (1997) postulates that the demands for ethical behaviour by corporations and their leaders are today stronger than ever before, for the following reasons: first, the enormous success of American businesses has bred extravagant expectations by the public; second, the new nobility, the priv-

Correspondence to:
Elsa Maria Nunes Barbosa
Polytechnic Institute of Beja
School of Technology and Management
Rua Pedro Soares
Beja 7800-295, Portugal
Tel.: +351 284 311 540
E-mail: elsa.barbosa@ipbeja.pt

ileged class that has emerged because of this enormous success, is corporate business—and society has always made demands of its nobility (*noblesse oblige*); and finally, Solomon states that 'now that businesses are often the most powerful institutions in the world, the expanse of social responsibility has enlarged to include areas formerly considered the domain of governments: quality of education and support of the arts, funding and facilities for basic research, urban planning and development, world hunger and poverty, hardcore unemployment. The more powerful business becomes in the world, the more responsibility for the well--being of the world it will be expected to bear' (pp. 204–206).

For Joyner and Payne (2002) businesses will in fact engage in ethical business practices for one of two reasons, one ethical in nature and one more Machiavellian. The ethical motivation guiding business is related to a desire to do the right thing, without external pressure or governmental constraint. These business people recognize their own personal existence in society and thus acknowledge that their firms must also operate in this sphere in an ethical manner. The more Machiavellian approach that businesses espouse in their use of ethics has its roots in a desire to convince the stakeholder that the firm is doing the right thing. The firm's end here is either to avoid legal consequences of its actions or to convince the stakeholders that the firm does have their best interests at heart and seeks to serve their interests rather than their own.

Ethics are defined as the conception of what is right and fair conduct or behaviour (Carroll, 1991; Freeman and Gilbert, 1988). 'Ethics is a system of value principles or practices and a definition of right and wrong' (Raiborn and Payne, 1990, p. 879). Velasquez (1999) defined ethics as being concerned with judgements involved in moral decisions: normative judgements which state or imply that something is good or bad, or right or wrong. Thus, these statements of ethics or value judgements attempt to ascribe value to actions, so the actor can determine whether or not he should engage in the action.

According to the non-profit organization Business Social Responsibility (BSR), the role of business is to create and deliver products and services in a way that treats people fairly, meets individuals' needs and aspirations within the boundaries of our planet, and encourages market and policy frameworks that enable a sustainable future. The role of BSR is to catalyze change within business by integrating sustainability into strategy and operations, and to promote collaboration among companies and their stakeholders for systemic progress towards a just and sustainable world.

In this way, Graafland and Smid (2012) said that business schools may provide information and training that form the mindsets of executives. Fligstein (1990) found that corporate executives' management styles were dependent on the type of training they received in business schools. For example, the European Business Ethics Network (EBEN) appeared to promote ethics and excellence in businesses, to increase awareness about ethical challenges in the global marketplace and to enable dialogue on the role of business in society. In the same way, the Business Social Responsibility believes that a just and sustainable world will result when the unique skills and resources of all sectors—business, civil society, and government—are aligned with this vision.

Vogel (1992) argues that business ethics has not yet globalized; the norms of ethical behaviour continue to vary widely in different capitalist nations. However, academic interest in

business ethics has substantially increased in a number of countries in Europe. For example, in 1983, the first chair in business ethics was established in Europe at the Netherlands School of Business; the second was established at another Dutch university three years later and four more have been founded subsequently in other European countries. In 1986, the Lord Mayor of London organized a formal conference on company philosophy and codes of business ethics for 100 representatives from industry and the professions. The following year, a group of 75 European business managers and academics established the European Business Ethics Network (EBEN); its first conference was held in 1987. In 1987, the first European business ethics journal, *Etica degli Affari*, was published, in Italy.

Since the mid-1980s, two ethics research centres have been established in Great Britain, in addition to one each in Belgium, Spain, Germany, and Switzerland. A survey of developments in European business ethics published in 1990 reported that, 'since three or four years ago the stream of publications (on business ethics) has been rapidly growing', with a disproportionate amount coming from Great Britain, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (van Luijk, 1990).

Three leading European business schools—INSEAD in France, the London Business School, and Italy's Bocconni—have established elective courses in business ethics and several others have held public conferences on this topic; some have also begun to include sessions on ethics in their executive educational programmes. The first European business ethics casebook was published in 1991 and the first issue of a management-oriented publication, *Business Ethics: A European Review*, appeared in the winter of 1992 (Donaldson, 1991).

Derived from business misconduct, business educators emphasize the need for additional instruction in ethics, to be taught in an ever increasing number of business ethics courses designed to assist the next generation of managers in avoiding the pitfalls of their predecessors (Vogel, 1992).

'Despite the all pervasive scandals of the 1980s, there is a tendency in Europe to regard the study of business ethics as faddish', as the *Financial Times* noted in the summer of 1992 (De George, 1992, p. 12).

A typical discussion about how business ethics education should be conducted often appears around the question of whether business ethics should be taught via a separate course or by integrating business ethics content across the curriculum, or perhaps whether cases or some other pedagogical approach should be used (Trevino, 1992).

Bennis and O'Toole (2005) argue that today MBA programmes face intense criticism for failing to impart useful skills, failing to prepare leaders, failing to instill norms of ethical behaviour—and even failing to lead graduates to good corporate jobs. These criticisms come not just from students, employers, and the media but also from deans of some of the most prestigious business schools. In business research, the things routinely ignored by academics on the grounds that cannot be measured—most human factors and all matters relating to judgment, ethics, and morality—are exactly what makes the difference between good business decisions and bad ones.

In this paper, we address the topic of the presence of the ethics content in the curriculum of undergraduate courses and we investigate to what extent can we compare the presence of this ethics content to the presence of other contents taught in the curricula of those undergraduate courses. For that, we used the expressions 'expressive' and 'expressiveness' as the

meaning of the presence of teaching of ethics or similar content compared to teaching of the disciplines in the course that have been analyzed in the present study.

A question arises: do the higher education institutions seek to prepare their students, in the various courses that they teach in their schools, with ethical values? For example, we can look at the impact that various online communities (e.g. Avaaz, One, Change) have been exerting on companies, governments and decision-makers in general, particularly when they feel that the decisions of these bodies question the balance, well-being and sustainability of society, which is increasingly a requirement of today's society.

Knoch (2004) argues that in Portugal the teaching of ethics does not currently have a very expressive role. Only a few higher courses contain this discipline in the curriculum, and even in these cases, however, this chair is usually given little relevance. The interest in ethical issues lies mainly in the field of ethics or professional ethics.

We used that as a base to create our hypothesis that the ethics contents present in the curriculum of courses are mainly oriented for professional ethics.

In the next sections, we present the methodology we used and next we describe the results and make the discussion of results. We finish with the conclusion and contribution of the present work, and we give suggestions for future research.

2. Methodology

This study seeks, on the one hand, to identify if the academies of higher education instill norms of ethical behaviour in their students and if the presence of the teaching of ethics is expressive according to all other subjects taught in those courses. On the other hand, it will be verified if the ethics contents that are taught in the courses are focused in the professional ethics area of the courses where it is taught. For that, an empirical identification and description of these issues within a higher education institution in Portugal was conducted.

To answer the issues raised above, the curricular units (disciplines) of 14 undergraduate courses taught in each of the four schools (organizational units)—School of Agriculture, School of Education, School of Technology and Management, School of Health—that constitute the Polytechnic Institute of Beja were analyzed. The website of the Polytechnic Institute of Beja in https://www.ipbeja.pt was consulted and a research were made in the website of each of the courses offered in each of the four schools of the Polytechnic Institute of Beja (see Table 1).

First, an analysis of the disciplines taught in each of the 14 courses was conducted. In each course it was identified whether a kind of discipline of ethics or similar was taught. When there was no explicit reference to the discipline of ethics, it was sought to identify other units (with meaning related with professional regulation, corporate social responsibility, sustainability) that did not have designation of ethics, however the name of the discipline induced that contents of ethics or similar were taught in the unit. When an explicit reference to the discipline of ethics wasn't found, a content analysis of the syllabus of different disciplines was carried out, through the name of the disciplines that were potentially an indicator of which of the contents of ethics or similar was taught in the unit.

According to Bardin (1995, p. 42), the content analysis appears as 'a set of techniques of analysis of the communications aiming to obtain, by procedures, systematic and objective

description of the contents of the messages, indicators (quantitative or not) that allow the inference of knowledge regarding the conditions of production/ reception (variables inferred) of these messages' (p. 42).

After identifying the discipline of ethics or similar taught in each course, and as a second step, a research was made to identify, in each course, the discipline that has the less number of hours taught and the discipline that has the more number of hours taught in the course. The number of hours taught in the discipline of ethics or similar in each course was further also analyzed. This procedure allowed to perceive the existence of the expressiveness of the teaching of ethics comparatively with other disciplines taught in each one of the courses. A third step was performed, with resource to content analysis, that will help us to clarify the hypothesis formulated.

The findings of the study will be presented in the next section, as well as the discussion on them.

Table 1. Website of each of the courses offered in each of the four schools
of the Polytechnic Institute of Beja

Schools of the Polytechnic Institute of Beja		Courses	Website
Polytechnic Institute of Beja	School of Agriculture	Agronomy	https://www.ipbeja.pt/en/Courses/esa-eag/Paginas/Curricular%20Units.aspx
		Food Science and Technology	https://www.ipbeja.pt/en/Courses/esa-fst/Paginas/CurricularUnits.aspx
		Environmental Engineering	https://www.ipbeja.pt/en/Courses/esa-ee/Paginas/CurricularUnits.aspx
	School of Education	Arts and Multimedia	https://www.ipbeja.pt/en/Courses/ese-apm/Paginas/CurricularUnits.aspx
		Education and Multimedia Communication	https://www.ipbeja.pt/en/Courses/ese-emc/Paginas/CurricularUnits.aspx
		Elementary and Early Education	https://www.ipbeja.pt/en/Courses/ese-eece/Paginas/CurricularUnits.aspx
		Social Work	https://www.ipbeja.pt/en/Courses/ese-sw/Paginas/CurricularUnits.aspx
		Sport	https://www.ipbeja.pt/en/Courses/ese-sc/Paginas/Curricular%20Units.aspx
	School of Technology and Management	Attorneyship	https://www.ipbeja.pt/en/Courses/es-tig-attorn/Paginas/CurricularUnits.aspx
		Business Management	https://www.ipbeja.pt/en/Courses/es-tig-bm/Paginas/CurricularUnits.aspx
		Computer Science	https://www.ipbeja.pt/en/Courses/es-tig-cs/Paginas/CurricularUnits.aspx
		Tourism	https://www.ipbeja.pt/en/Courses/estig-tourism/Paginas/CurricularUnits.aspx
	School of Health	Nursing	https://www.ipbeja.pt/en/Courses/ess-nur/Paginas/CurricularUnits.aspx
		Occupational Therapy	https://www.ipbeja.pt/en/Courses/ess-ot/Paginas/CurricularUnits.aspx

S o u r c e: Author's own elaboration based on the website of the Polytechnic Institute of Beja.

3. Findings of the study

In analyzing the results of the data collected, through the application of the techniques mentioned above, it was sought to understand whether the teaching of ethics is expressive, in terms of the number of hours allocated for the teaching of this discipline, in each of the 14 courses assigned to the 4 schools that constitute the Polytechnic Institute of Beja, compared to the number of hours allocated for the teaching of the other subjects in each of the 14 courses, respectively.

Through the observation of Figure 1, it can be seen that in the generality of the 14 courses taught at the Polytechnic Institute of Beja, with the exception of the Tourism course, the number of hours attributed to the teaching of ethics content or similar is very close to the minimum number of hours attributed to the teaching of other subjects taught in each of the courses analyzed. For example, for the Agronomy course one discipline was identified that had 50 hours more of teaching than ethics or similar, and in the same course one discipline was identified having 25 hours less than teaching of ethics or similar in that course.

It was verified that in 3 of the 14 courses analyzed there was no identification of any programmatic content related with the teaching of ethics or contents related with ethics, such as, for example, contents related with professional regulation, corporate social responsibility or sustainability. These 3 courses are assigned to the School of Education.

It will also be relevant to note the fact that the Business Management course is the only course in which the minimum number of teaching hours of another discipline is equal to the number of teaching hours of the discipline of ethics.
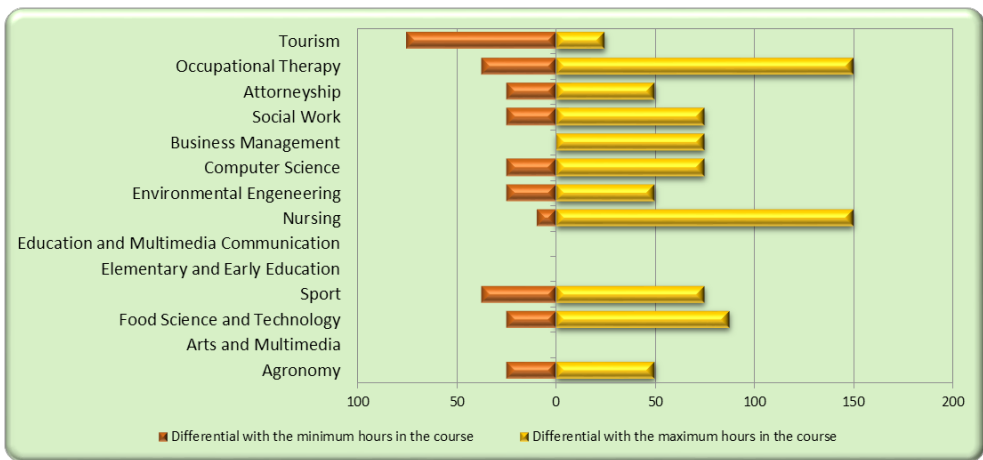

Figure 1. Differential of the number of hours the subject of ethics is taught comparatively with the minimum/ maximum of the number of hours the other subjects are taught in each course

S o u r c e: Author's own elaboration based on the website of the Polytechnic Institute of Beja.

From the range of 11 courses where teaching of ethics or similar content was identified the Business Management course is the course where there is less expressiveness of the discipline of business ethics, compared to the other courses taught at the institution that supports

the present research. In the remaining 9 courses, it is verified that the presence of ethics or similar teaching is not expressive, given that the number of teaching hours of the ethics or similar discipline is close, although higher, to the minimum number of teaching hours of other discipline in each of the courses in question. However, this occurrence is clearly contradicted by the Tourism course, where it is verified that the presence of ethics or similar teaching is significant, compared to the other courses taught at the institution. That is, the number of teaching hours of the discipline of ethics or similar is close, although inferior, to the maximum number of teaching hours of another disciplines in the course in question.

Through the analysis of data presented in Figure 2, it is also verified that more than a half of the subjects with ethics or similar content are taught in the third year of the course (in the first or the second semester).
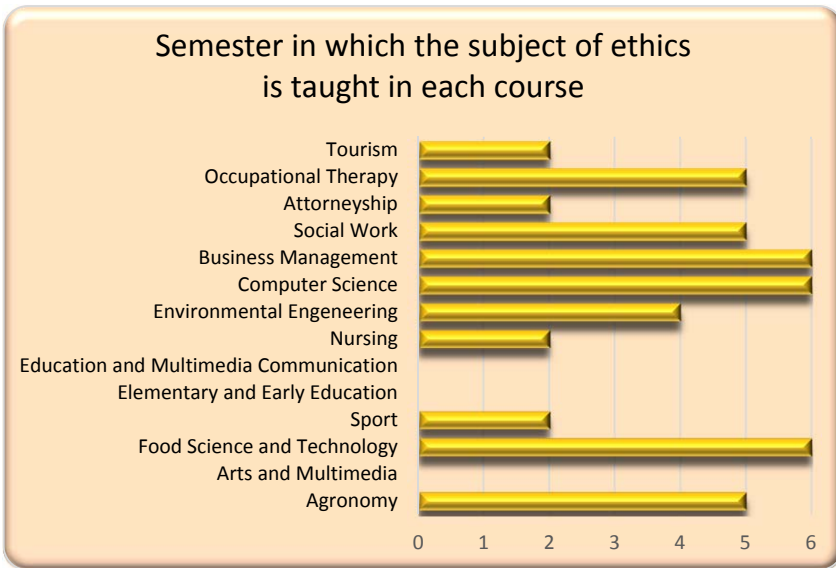

Figure 2. Semester in which the subject of ethics is taught in each course

It is also verified, by analyzing the results of the data collected, that on average, the discipline of ethics or similar has been taught in the institution for about 8 years, approximately—see Figure 3.

It can be verified that after performing the content analysis to the disciplines taught in each course, it was possible to understand whether the discipline of ethics or similar is mainly oriented for the professional ethics area of each course or whether these disciplines teach contents about ethics, in general, or teach contents in related issues, like sustainability or corporate social responsibility, for example. Through the data presented in Table 2 it is possible to verify that the subject of ethics taught in the majority of the courses of the analyzed institution is oriented to the professional ethics area in the majority of the courses. According to this, the hypothesis drawn in the present work could be sustained.
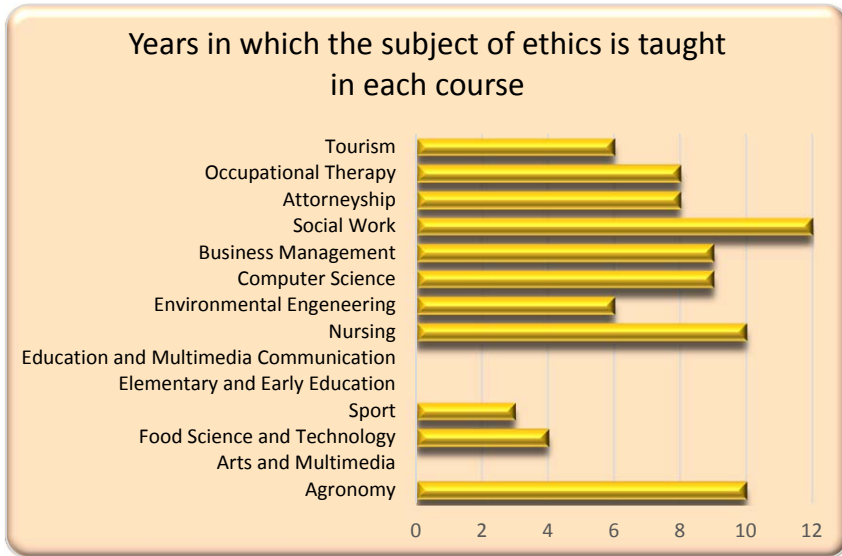
Figure 3. Years in which the subject of ethics is taught in each course

Table 2. Subject of professional ethics or subject similar to ethics taught in each course offered in Polytechnic Institute of Beja

Courses	Subject of professional ethics	Subject similar to ethics
Agronomy	–	✓
Arts and Multimedia	–	–
Food Science and Technology	–	✓
Sport	✓	–
Elementary and Early Education	–	–
Education and Multimedia Communication	–	–
Nursing	✓	–
Environmental Engineering	–	✓
Computer Science	✓	–
Business Management	✓	–
Social Work	✓	–
Attorneyship	✓	–
Occupational Therapy	✓	–
Tourism	–	✓

4. Discussion of results

Bennis and O'Toole (2005) refer in their study that 'before the recent scandals [TVco, Arthur Andersen, WorldCom, and Enron], business students spent '95% of their time learning how to calculate with a view to maximizing wealth. Just 5% of their time is spent developing their moral capacities' (p.104). They also refer that:

> [B]usiness education … is devoted overwhelmingly to technical training. This is ironic, because … studies showed that executives who fail—financially as well as morally—rarely do so from a lack of expertise. Rather, they fail because they lack interpersonal skills and practical wisdom; what Aristotle called prudence.
> Aristotle taught that genuine leadership consisted in the ability to identify and serve the common good. To do so requires much more than technical training. It requires an education in moral reasoning, which must include history, philosophy, literature, theology, and logic (p. 104).

According to the results obtained in the present work, they are not so far from the reality described by Bennis and O'Toole that represents the reality of academies in Europe and also in America. In the institution where the present work was developed, it is notorious that the curriculum of the teaching of ethics and similar is not expressive, according to the comparison that was made of the number of hours that are dedicated to the teaching of other units.

More worrying is the reality inherent to the Business Management course, where the expressiveness of teaching ethics is the lowest in all the courses taught at the institution targeted of this study.

This will affect the decision-making of future managers. As Vogel (1992) referred, it is necessary to assist the next generation of managers in avoiding the pitfalls of their predecessors.

Citing Rakesh Khurana, an associate professor of Harvard Business School, Bennis and O'Toole (2005) pointed out that professions have at least four key elements: an accepted body of knowledge, a system for certifying that individuals have mastered that body of knowledge before they were allowed to practice, a commitment to the public good, and an enforceable code of ethics. Professions thus are oriented towards practice and focused on client needs and above all, professions integrate knowledge and practice. Our results are consistent with this statement, since they reveal that in the institution where the study took place there is a concern to prepare the students of different courses with a subject oriented to teaching contents in the area of professional ethics of a specific course.

It could be also interesting to try to understand why more than a half of the subjects about ethics are taught in the last year of the course. Probably because the students have a higher maturity to understand complex questions, like it is the case of themes that are discussed in the scope of the subject of ethics.

According to the literature review, the emergence of ethics in the European curricula begins in the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. In the present study, the references to the introduction of the subject of ethics in the curricula appeared twelve and ten years ago (in the year of 2004 and 2006). This could be a good indicator of the concern of higher education

institutions for facing young people with values that will orient them in the decision-making they will need to take over their professional path.

5. Conclusions

This research identified the presence of the teaching of ethics or similar in the curriculum of the courses of an institution of higher education. On the one hand, the study found that this subject is present in the majority of the courses, however the expressiveness of this discipline in the analyzed courses is lower in comparison to the expressiveness of other disciplines that have clearly a higher attribution of hours in the teaching of their contents. On the other hand, it was verified that in more than a half of the courses where the subject of ethics is taught the teaching is oriented for the professional ethical area, sustaining our hypothesis. Also, more than a half of the disciplines, in the area of ethics or similar, were taught in the last year of the course. And it was verified, yet, that the subject was introduced in the courses about 8 years ago, on average.

This work was a contribution to understand the 'state of art' of the teaching of ethics and related contents in the institution where the study was conducted.

While it is impossible to generalize the results of this study because of the small sample, a larger study, using the framework tested in this research, could be undertaken in order to further explain the presence and expressiveness of the teaching of ethics or similar in the curriculum of the courses.

A longitudinal study could shed much more light on the issue. For future research it could be studied whether there is some kind of change in the number of hours attributed to the teaching of ethics or similar contents.

In a world where success for business is measured almost exclusively by rankings, the ability to show that ethical behaviour can boost results of business might provide the impetus for real change in many organizations.

This current work is centred in one higher education institution, in Portugal. The future investigation could rather look at the state of ethical education at an international level.

Extending the analysis performed to other higher education institutions in order to characterize the expressiveness of ethics teaching in the study plans of the courses taught in Portuguese higher education institutions could be a good proposal for future research work. In the same way, expanding this analysis to an international level, in order to verify similarities and differences between countries, will be a contribution for future research. It will also be ambitious to make a comparison between the indicators obtained in the present and future research applied at international level, compared to already existing indicators of ethical practices adopted by the country.

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Nauczanie etyki w szkołach wyższych. Realia instytucji portugalskiej

Abstrakt: W ostatnich latach jesteśmy świadkami sekwencji zdarzeń wynikających z nieprawidłowego postępowania rozmaitych decydentów. Świadomość ta doprowadziła do tego, że szkoły uwzględniły w swoich programach nauczania przedmioty zawierające treści z zakresu etyki i jej podobne. W niniejszym badaniu podjęto próbę weryfikacji, czy nauczanie etyki jako dyscypliny obecne jest na kursach prowadzonych w instytucjach szkolnictwa wyższego. Jednocześnie ma ono na celu weryfikację wyrazistości dyscypliny, jaką jest etyka, w programach nauczania kursów w porównaniu z innymi dyscyplinami nauczanymi w trakcie tych kursów. Niniejsza praca skoncentrowała się na portugalskiej instytucji szkolnictwa wyższego, gromadzenie zaś danych zostało przeprowadzone z użyciem zasobów do analizy treści. Wyniki pozwalają wnioskować, że wyrazistość nauczania etyki jest ograniczona, będąc nauczaniem dyscypliny zorientowanym w ramach każdego kursu na obszar etyki zawodowej.

Słowa kluczowe: etyka, nauczanie etyki, szkolnictwo wyższe