



More than a subject: integrating ethics into the core of economics education

Tjerk Budding, Kim Meijer, and Marion Smit

Week of Economics Education, 25 November 2025

Agenda

1. Introduction
2. Presentation about current practices in ethics education in economics programs (Marion Smit)
3. Renewal of ethics education in the VU BSc Economics and Business Economics program: Goals and dilemmas (Tjerk Budding)
4. Discussion about goals and dilemmas in small groups
5. Perspectives, approaches and working methods for improving ethics education (Kim Meijer)
6. Discussion about ways of improvement
7. Plenary conclusion (Kim Meijer)



Quick round of introductions

1. Your name
2. Affiliation
3. In one sentence: what do you hope to learn from this workshop?



Current practices in ethics education in economics programs

Marion Smit - lecturer-researcher at the Hogeschool van
Amsterdam and PhD candidate at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Methodology and response rate

- Survey questionnaire (N=38) and semi-structured interviews (N=11)
- NB: limited external validity and reliability
- Published as book and in the Business and Professional Ethics Journal

| Response | Academia | Training | Total |
|-------------------------|----------|----------|-------|
| Anonymous email link | 20 | 7 | 27 |
| Social media (LinkedIn) | 7 | 4 | 11 |
| Total | 27 | 11 | 38 |



Theory used in Business Ethics teaching

| | Academia, N=27 | Training, N=11 |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|
| Consequentialism/utilitarianism (Bentham / Mill) | 16 | 5 |
| Deontology (Kant) | 14 | 5 |
| Virtue ethics (Aristotle) | 16 | 4 |
| Social justice / social contract (Rawls) | 11 | 3 |
| Care ethics (Gilligan / Noddings) | 9 | 1 |
| Pragmatic ethics (Dewey) | 6 | 4 |
| Meta ethics | 5 | 2 |
| Intuitive ethics | 0 | 1 |
| No ethical theory | 0 | 0 |

Other ethical perspectives named:

feminist ethics, reformational philosophy, bounded ethicality, postmodernism, human rights, cultural relativism, corporate governance, process ethics.

Effectiveness of didactic approaches in Dutch Business Ethics

| Academia, N=27 | Effective | Neutral | Not effective |
|---|-----------|-----------|---------------|
| Working with real life cases | 20 | | |
| Explaining different ethical perspectives | 18 | 2 | |
| Essay writing | 13 | 7 | |
| Guest speakers with personal experience in ethical issues | 12 | 8 | |
| Voicing personal values | 12 | 7 | 1 |
| Working with fictional cases | 8 | 10 | 2 |
| Adding an ethics paragraph to products of other modules / courses | 7 | 8 | 5 |
| Taking a personal ethics test (e.g. PMC or PET test) | 2 | 16 | 2 |

Importance of subjects in Dutch Business Ethics

| Academia, N=27 | Very important | Important | Neutral | Not important |
|---|----------------|-----------|----------|---------------|
| Corporate governance | 9 | 8 | 2 | 1 |
| Leadership and ethics management | 9 | 8 | 2 | 1 |
| Sustainability | 7 | 10 | 1 | 1 |
| Human Rights, Poverty and inequality, Business and wealth creation, Diversity, Just energy transition, Digital transformation, Corruption | | | | |
| Whistleblowing | 3 | 7 | 8 | 1 |
| Conflict and terrorism | 1 | 5 | 6 | 8 |
| Religion and spirituality in economy and business | 1 | 7 | 5 | 7 |



Renewal of ethics education in the VU BSc Economics and Business Economics program: Goals and dilemmas

Program Director Bachelor Economics and Business Economics and
Professor Public Sector Accounting, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Renewal of ethics education in the VU BSc EBE program: Goals and dilemmas

The core values of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam are: **Responsible, Open and Personal**.

VU's educational vision is detailed in five design principles:

1. **Education is activating.** This is achieved through innovative didactic forms of work that activate students where we strive for an optimal integration of between physical and digital forms of education (personal).
2. **The student is primarily responsible for his or her own study career and study success (personal, responsible).** With our education we stimulate students' autonomy and self-directedness.
3. **VU is inclusive (open, personal, responsible).** We want to be a welcoming place for students from diverse backgrounds. Diversity among our students and faculty is integrated into education, including through the principles of the Mixed Classroom.
4. **Social issues are studied and addressed in a multidisciplinary way (open, accountable).**
5. **VU knows its social responsibility and expresses it in its education (open, responsible).**



Renewal of ethics education in the VU BSc EBE program: Goals and dilemmas

As part of the renewal of the BSc EBE program, we want to strengthen the attention to ethical issues in the program.

Issues that were addressed:

- Integration in the learning outcomes
- Positioning in the program
- Integration in other courses
- Working methods
- Book



Renewal of ethics education in the VU BSc EBE program: Goals and dilemmas

Integration of business ethics in the **learning outcomes**: this was already the case, but now it was made more specific and related to ESG

| | Revised learning outcomes BSc EBE |
|---|--|
| 1. ACADEMIC AND RESEARCH SKILLS | Graduates can conduct a basic research project from start to finish |
| 2. BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE – knowledge | Graduates demonstrate theoretical and empirical knowledge concerning the relevant areas in general economics and business economics |
| 3. BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE – application | Graduates can analyse a real-life problem by applying relevant theories and methodologies |
| 4. SOCIAL PROFESSIONAL SKILLS | Graduates can professionally set-up and execute an oral or written presentation for a (non-)expert audience, and collaborate successfully in teams |
| 5. BROADENING YOUR HORIZON | Graduates are able to reflect on the environmental, social, governance and ethical implications of professional and governmental decisions |
| 6. SELF-AWARENESS | Graduates can evaluate their own knowledge, opinions and actions. |



Renewal of ethics education in the VU BSc EBE program: Goals and dilemmas

- **Positioning in the program:** the Ethics course is currently in the second year and is a so-called intensive course (e.g., students only follow this course in this specific period).
- Both arguments for moving the course to an earlier moment (especially: laying the ground for further application of ethical theories) and later moment (more knowledge about issues in economics) could be distinguished.

Decision: keep current position.

However:

- also pay attention to ethical issues in previous courses
- use theories that are discussed in ethics course more specifically in courses that follow

Renewal of ethics education in the VU BSc EBE program: Goals and dilemmas

- As part of the renewal, a workshop was organized in which the course coordinator presented the main design principles and course content to the other course coordinators.

Key Areas of Focus

The course introduces students to:

- **Foundational Concepts** of markets, property rights, and law
- **Purpose and Responsibilities** of corporations
- **Normative Theories** examining the role of business in society

The course analyses ethical values such as

- Welfare** Social good and individual well-being
- Efficiency** Resource allocation and productivity
- Liberty** Autonomy and freedom in markets



Renewal of ethics education in the VU BSc EBE program: Goals and dilemmas

For **integration**, all course coordinators were asked to fill in a self-assessment form and indicate to which extent their courses pay attention to ethical issues.

This revealed the following picture:

| Attention to ethical issues in a course | Year 1 | Year 2 | Year 3 |
|---|--------|--------|--------|
| Explicit attention | 25.0% | 64.3% | 44.4% |
| Implicit/ indirect attention | 37.5% | 28.6% | 55.6% |
| Briefly / not discussed | 37.5% | 7.1% | 0.0% |
| | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |

Workshops will be organized with the course coordinator to discuss how the attention to ethical issues can be improved.



Renewal of ethics education in the VU BSc EBE program: Goals and dilemmas

Teaching methods - We want to *present* the main schools and theories about economic / business ethics and teach the students how to *apply* them.

Therefore, the final assignment consists of:

- Exam (50%, individual)
- Online portfolio (50%, group work): Students discuss an article about a predetermined topic, using a variety of different media, and also engage actively with other groups' portfolios (provide feedback etc.).



Renewal of ethics education in the VU BSc EBE program: Goals and dilemmas

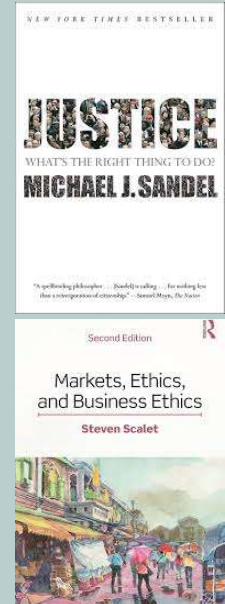
Final dilemma: which **book** to use?

Before, we used 'Justice' by Michael Sandel.

- Lecturers considered this a good read, discussing ethical theories and dilemmas in a well-written format.
- However, it is less a 'traditional textbook', presenting issues in a more structured way.

Now, we use 'Markets, Ethics, and Business Ethics' by Steven Scalet.

- The book is online available via the VU library and offers a nice structure.
- However, it is considered a less-attractive read.



Discussion in groups (10 minutes)

- How do you think about the goals of ethics education in economics programs? – What do you recognize in our approach/ what is different in your own approach?
- Which dilemmas do you observe? - What issues within ethics education are you most unsure about?

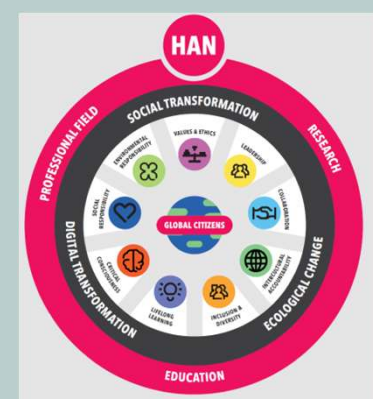


Perspectives, approaches and working methods for improving ethics education

Assistant Professor in Business Ethics, Nyenrode Business University and associate
Associate Professor in Business Ethics, HAN University of Applied Sciences

Ethics education at HAN

- HAN strategic goal 1: reflective and socially engaged global citizens
- Global citizenship understood as an *ethical* position
- Stimulate this position through ethics education



van Rompay-Bartels & Tuninga, 2023

GOAL 1
STUDENTS EVOLVE INTO REFLECTIVE AND SOCIALLY
ENGAGED GLOBAL CITIZENS

The fragility of ethics education

- Three problems:
 1. Fragmented
 2. Formative
 3. Ego oriented



Ethics Education Hub

- Internal grant to develop digital supermarket for ethics education
- Customers: HEI's and professional organisations
- Departments: teaching methods, cases, single classes and modules, learning pathways, teacher professionalisation schemes



ETHICS HUB

Proficiency levels



Competencies and behavioral indicators

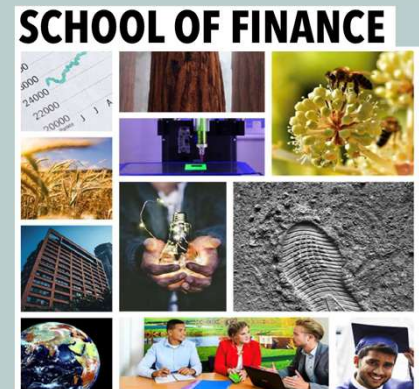
| LEVEL OF PROFICIENCY | INDICATOR | EXAMPLES |
|--|--|--|
| 1. Recognizing moral problems/situations | 1.1 Knows what ethical dilemmas are and can explain concepts relevant to their own field of study. | Ethics, Dilemmas, Moral sensitivity, Ego-system, Power, Bias, Assumption, Type 1 thinking, Type 2 thinking, Norm, Value |
| | 1.2 Can describe the main ethical theories relevant to the field. | Deontology (principles), Utilitarianism (consequences), Virtue ethics, Care ethics, Contractualism, Existentialism, Relativism |
| | 1.3 Can apply understanding of ethical considerations when critically thinking about moral issues. | |
| | 1.4 Can use understanding of ethical considerations to develop personal moral standpoints. | |
| | 1.5 Recognizes Type 1 and Type 2 thinking in themselves and others. | |
| | 1.6 Recognizes ethical issues and sensitivities. | |
| | 1.7 Identifies ethical issues and sensitivities in various contexts. | |
| | 1.8 Reflects on personal reasoning and feelings about an ethical issue. | |
| | 1.9 Recognizes bias and assumption. | |
| | 1.10 Recognizes moral discomfort in themselves. | |
| | 1.11 Recognizes discomfort in others. | |
| | 1.12 Recognizes mechanisms of moral disengagement. | Moral justification, Euphemistic language, Comparative analysis, Displacement of responsibility, Diffusion of responsibility, Dehumanization, Attribution of blame |
| | 1.13 Recognizes the process of moral disengagement in themselves and others. | |

Two examples

1. **Bachelor programs:** Finance & Control, Accountancy, Finance, Tax and Advice

2. **Master program:** Circular Economy

→ *Necessity of implementing ethics education in economy and business schools*



Why implement ethics in economics programs?

Bad Management Theories Are Destroying Good Management Practices

SUMANTRA GHOSHAL

Advanced Institute of Management Research (AIM), UK and London Business School

© *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 2005, Vol. 4, No. 1, 75–91.

Do business and economics studies erode prosocial values?

Mattias Sundemo | Åsa Löfgren

Received: 16 April 2024 | Accepted: 3 December 2024

DOI: 10.1002/soej.12765

Bachelor program



What is ethics? (P1)



A typology of ethical problems (P2)



Financial facts: differentiating between private and business costs (P3)

- Example 1st year students

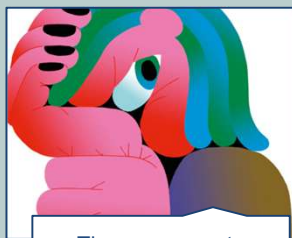


Stakeholdertheory (P4)



Level of proficiency: recognize

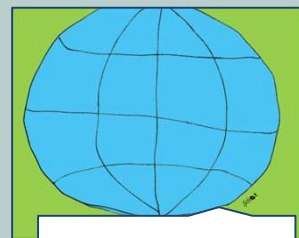
Master Circular Economy



Three arguments *against* ethics



A typology of ethical problems, focus on **dilemma**

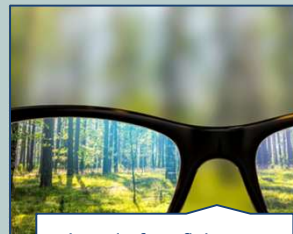


Dilemma workshop

- Business ethics module
- Preparing students to chair moral deliberation session



Train-the-trainer



Level of proficiency: recognize and discuss

Samen naar toekomstgericht economieonderwijs

Blijf ook na vandaag op de hoogte en laat je inspireren

weekvanheteconomieonderwijs.nl



g.budding@vu.nl
k.meijer@nyenrode.nl
m.smit2@hva.nl