

From External Norms to Internal Standards: A Self-regulation Perspective on Teacher Ethics Internalization in Higher Education

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Abstract

The way in which ethics are addressed in higher education is determined by the manner in which academics use their discretion when the rules of the institution allow for interpretation. This article presents a theoretical explanation of ethics internalization as the process of forming and consistently putting into practice professional standards that one personally endorses. By linking recent research on moral identity, moral self-regulation, and motivational internalization, it shows how university teachers convert external expectations into standards by which they assess their own behaviour. The mechanism proposed involves ethical self-monitoring, professional self-judgment, and corrective self-reaction. Over a number of cycles, teachers detect discrepancies that have a moral significance, justify their decisions on the grounds of their educational responsibilities, and adjust their behaviour in light of the consequences. Four propositions outline how reflective monitoring, autonomous endorsement, corrective action, and feedback that is consistent with the institution support this process. The framework makes a distinction between internalization and visible compliance as well as between internalization and the maintenance of a positive moral self-image. Its value lies in providing an account of how professional standards come to have a regulatory effect through ordinary teaching decisions, and in identifying practical ways in which universities can link ethical codes, professional deliberation, and accountable action.

Keywords

Teacher ethics, Ethics internalization, Self-regulation, Moral identity, Higher education

Introduction

University lecturers have to make important decisions regarding assessment, supervision, student participation, and the allocation of academic opportunities. Although a rule can require fair assessment, the teacher is still required to decide what fairness means in the case of students who have unequal circumstances. While a supervision policy can forbid exploitation, it is the day-to-day judgments that decide which contributions are acknowledged. In such situations ethics internalization becomes a major issue in the exercise of professional discretion - that is, how institutional expectations turn into standards that the teachers use themselves to guide their actions.

Recent studies have linked moral development with self-regulated learning and the development of virtue [1]. The research into the relational self also sets moral behaviour within social and cultural relationships [2]. For higher education, these views suggest a way of explaining how

teachers can develop ethical agency as a result of their interactions with students, colleagues, and institutions. The purpose of this explanation is to show the connection between a morally desirable aim and the series of decisions that are made when professional responsibility is exercised.

The article puts forward a cyclic explanation of how teachers come to internalise ethical principles. Its main point is that external standards gain internal control when teachers regularly use professional standards which they have adopted themselves to identify discrepancies, assess their options, and adjust their behaviour. Moral identity gives a direction as to the type of professional a person aims to become. Self-regulation then shows how that direction is applied in making specific decisions. The article presents four theoretical propositions and draws out the implications for ethics education in universities. These propositions are conceptual statements concerning

higher education, having been developed through the integration of theory and with the help of illustrative reasoning.

What becomes internalized

Here, ethics internalization is described as the process by which a teacher comes to accept the professional ethical standards and then uses them as grounds for assessing and altering their behaviour.

Three characteristics are involved: The standard must be seen as justified, it must affect the teacher's decisions. Its application must always remain open to being corrected if experience shows that it has caused harm or proven inconsistent. A teacher may be able to quote the code accurately without fulfilling these conditions. On the other hand, internalization can be observed when a teacher starts to make a correction before any complaint or formal punishment has taken place.

Motivational internalization offers a helpful way of distinguishing between acting under external regulation and coming to identify with the value of a requirement [3]. Van Petegem and his colleagues use this distinction in relation to adolescents' legal socialization, linking procedural justice with kinds of internalization [4].

Although the situation is different from that in university teaching, the conceptual distinction makes it clear why mere conformity is not enough to show that a norm is owned. A teacher who gives an explanation of an assessment decision solely on the grounds of fear of an appeal adopts a different regulatory approach from one who justifies the same decision on the basis of students'

right to consistent evaluation. Moral identity has a second dimension. Some studies examine how moral traits become part of the self. By contrast, research on prescriptive and proscriptive moral self-regulation emphasizes two priorities: acting morally and refraining from wrongdoing [5,6].

Taken together, these different approaches indicate that ethical professionalism entails both restraint and a positive sense of responsibility. It is essential to avoid discrimination, and teachers should also think about whether their practices allow for meaningful participation.

A professional moral identity may still come into conflict with other personal and professional obligations. Carminati and Gao Hélot look at the multilevel dynamics of such conflicts in situations that have an ethical dimension [7]. In higher education, similar conflicts may arise. One conflict emerges when educators try to support a struggling student while keeping consistent standards for the whole class. Another appears when they seek to remain loyal to colleagues while assigning attributions fairly and accurately. Internalization thus involves the ability to set out and consider the opposing reasons. The framework regards the establishment of justifiable and revisable professional standards as its main outcome.

The self-regulatory mechanism

The functions listed in Table 1 are the ones by means of which professional standards gain regulatory force, as shown in the case of university teaching.

Table 1. Self-regulatory functions in teacher ethics internalization.

Function	Guiding question	Contribution to internalization	Illustrative university practice
Ethical self-monitoring	Where does practice depart from an endorsed responsibility?	Makes ethically relevant discrepancies available for judgment.	Compare feedback opportunities across students with similar learning needs.
Professional self-judgment	Which response is justified by the responsibilities at stake?	Connects institutional expectations with reasons the teacher endorses.	Justify an extension decision through consistency, accessibility, and educational purpose.
Corrective self-reaction	What action will address the discrepancy?	Gives the endorsed standard practical force through accountable correction.	Recheck comparable scripts and explain any resulting grade adjustments.
Feedback across cycles	What do the consequences imply for future decisions?	Refines the application of standards and their integration into professional identity.	Review students' experiences after a change and revise the procedure where needed.

Ethical self-monitoring: Making discrepancies visible

Self-monitoring starts when a teacher considers the ethical implications of the routine decisions they make [8]. The proper comparison should be drawn between actual practice and the responsibilities one has accepted. Several examples illustrate this. Is a grading rubric applied consistently? Are expectations for supervision clearly communicated? Does classroom interaction tend to privilege certain voices at the expense of others? Ethical information consists of the students' experiences and the patterns that emerge from these decisions, as well as the teacher's intentions.

The research into teacher dilemmas shows just how important it is to pay attention to this issue. Tsega points out the ethical problems relating to school rules, honesty, recognition, and the personal situations of students [9]. Darga describes the dilemmas associated with unequal access to technology and family participation in online preschool education [10]. These studies focus on school settings and show the level of situational complexity that an account of professional ethical regulation must take into account. In universities as well, similar issues can occur regarding access to learning resources or the unequal opportunities to receive supervisory attention.

Monitoring becomes effective when the discrepancies are specific enough to guide action. "I should be fair" gives a general guiding principle, while "students who had similar work were given different feedback opportunities" points to a practice that can be looked at. Teachers also need information which contradicts positive views of their own behaviour, and anonymous feedback, the comparison of marked assignments, and discussions of difficult cases can provide this information.

Proposition 1: Ethical self-monitoring leads to the internalisation of ethics when it connects specific discrepancies in teaching practice with the professional duties which the teacher considers to be personally binding.

The way this works is by improving ethical visibility. When people pay attention to something repeatedly, the effects which were previously unnoticed become available for professional assessment. While surveillance might lead to more attention being paid to violations that are required to be reported, the proposed mechanism relies on attention being given to the educational reasons

which make a discrepancy important.

Professional self-judgment: Turning rules into reasons

A situation becomes regulatory when a teacher assesses it using a significant standard. With regard to self-judgment, both the action itself and the reasons behind it are taken into account. When considering a request for an extension, a teacher should take into consideration consistency, accessibility, confidentiality, and the educational purpose of the deadline. Internalization occurs when the teacher is able to explain how the decision reflects these responsibilities and can have that explanation examined.

Krettenauer and Stichter claimed that "moral identity goals promoted the development of virtuous characteristics when these goals were adequate in their abstraction, were internally motivated, and were directed towards improvement". Their view indicates a beneficial connection between general professional aims and specific rules. An abstract commitment to respecting students can help in dealing with new situations, while the procedural requirements make it possible to check the application of the rule. However, excessive abstraction allows for convenient interpretations; on the other hand, a strict adherence to procedure may cause the interests which the procedure is intended to serve to be overlooked. The process in question brings these levels together by providing reasons. The teacher has to determine the purpose of a norm, take into account the people it affects, and give a reason why a specific application is justifiable. The norm acquires internal authority since the teacher takes on the responsibility for that justification. It is still necessary to carry out a critical examination since an expectation of the institution may itself be in conflict with an educational duty. When it comes to endorsement, the ethical justification of the norm is considered, along with the grounds on which its application might be challenged.

Proposition 2: External ethical expectations become internal standards when teachers autonomously endorse their professional justification and use that justification to resolve competing obligations.

What autonomy entails is having control over one's reasons in the context of accountable professional relationships. According to Chu and Vu's account based on relations, social and cultural relationships should be taken into account when carrying out moral actions [2].

Colleagues and students can assist in determining whether a teacher's justification takes into account the people who will be affected by a decision. The exchange between them enhances self-evaluation by bringing to light omissions which individual reflection might fail to notice.

Corrective self-reaction: Giving standards practical force

Self-reaction concerns how teachers respond to their ethical judgments, including whether they initiate and sustain corrective action. A teacher might notice that the marking is inconsistent, admit that this is unfair, and yet put off carrying out the correction since going over the grades would involve additional work. Internalization gains practical significance once an accepted standard guides specific responses. These responses may include reviewing comparable marking scripts, providing explanations for corrections, or adjusting assessment procedures for future use.

The study carried out by Rullo and his colleagues has developed a model which predicts moral intentions and behaviour, linking moral identity, moral self-efficacy, and moral elevation [11]. It thus offers a basis for considering one's perceived ability to act as relevant to moral regulation. In the current framework, a teacher's belief that it is possible to make a correction aids in turning judgment into action. This represents one of the enabling conditions in the cycle. The explanation still centres on how the standards regulate professional conduct.

Corrective action also results in feedback. For example, altering the way people participate might bring to light perspectives that were earlier excluded, and modifying supervision agreements might show unclear expectations. These outcomes then serve to guide future monitoring and judgment. Because the process is repeated, ethical practices become more reliable, but unforeseen consequences may also lead to further discussion. Thus, the cycle brings about both the continuity of professional purpose and the ability to revise its application.

An important difference lies in who or what the response is aimed at. If the aim is to protect favourable self-image, this can lead to explanations which reduce discomfort without abandoning the harmful practice. By contrast, corrective regulation focuses on the practice and its consequences. A teacher's readiness to admit a particular

mistake can thus show his or her commitment to an ethical standard, even if such an admission disrupts a positive narrative of past behaviour.

Proposition 3: Ethics internalization strengthens when ethical self-judgment leads to feasible corrective action and subsequent evaluation of its consequences for professional practice and those affected.

Recurrent cycles and professional identity

The three functions make up a recurring sequence: An accepted responsibility draws the attention. Monitoring shows that there is a discrepancy. Judgment then identifies an appropriate response, and the action produces consequences which in turn lead to the process being restarted. As time goes on, the teacher acquires a more refined understanding of what professional responsibility entails in different situations.

Identity and practice are linked to one another. The direction of the cycle is provided by moral identity, while the identity gains specific content through repeated decisions. A commitment to being a fair teacher becomes more particular as a result of experiences involving assessment, accommodation, and student voice and at the same time can become more demanding as the teacher comes to recognize effects that were earlier overlooked. The framework therefore sees internalization as resulting from a dynamic relationship between reasons, judgments, and actions. The most clear-cut examples of this are consistency when external oversight is limited, the ability to justify one's decisions on educational grounds, and a readiness to alter a practice in response to credible feedback. These examples offer analytically separate criteria for evaluating internalization beyond mere statements of ethical commitment.

Institutional conditions and theoretical implications

Professional self-regulation functions in a series of institutional arrangements which determine what teachers notice and what they are able to alter [12]. The way in which reports are handled, the amount of work involved, the criteria for promotion, and the way in which departments respond to criticism all affect the cost of recognizing a discrepancy. When transparency is formally rewarded yet leads to foreseeable punishments in ordinary departmental life, teachers are given contradictory messages regarding the real authority of ethical standards.

Fair procedures are important since institutions play a

role in justifying people's expectations. Universities can demonstrate their support for this endorsement in several ways. They clarify relevant requirements, apply those requirements consistently, allow stakeholders to challenge decisions, and address ethical concerns through trustworthy procedures.

When accountability provides not only consequences but also the reasons for actions and practical feedback, it becomes more educationally effective. In his discussion of care ethics and slow scholarship, Bozalek emphasizes attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, and the conditions of academic work [13]. These issues point to an institutional requirement closely tied to the proposed reflective cycle. Specifically, teachers need protected opportunities.

With such opportunities, they can notice the unintended consequences of their assessment and teaching decisions. They may then respond in a careful, thoughtful way. Arrangements regarding heavy workload which leave no meaningful room for careful deliberation significantly limit the ability of educators to exercise their professional responsibility in ethically sound ways. Moreover, open collective discussion among peers can also highlight a recurring systemic problem for which a suitable and lasting solution requires deliberate change at departmental level.

Proposition 4: The link between repeated ethical self-regulation and the internalization of ethics becomes stronger. This happens when an institution's procedures

match the ethical standards it communicates. These procedures should also provide real opportunities for discussion and remedial action.

The framework introduces three related distinctions. It begins by distinguishing between internalization and behavioural conformity by referring to ownership of professional reasons. Next, it describes the regulatory function of moral identity in terms of three specific aspects: attention, judgment, and response. Finally, this framework treats individual agency and institutional support as interdependent conditions. It therefore offers an account of internalization. This account acknowledges teachers' responsibilities. At the same time, it illustrates how organizational arrangements help teachers carry out those responsibilities.

The propositions yield differentiated expectations for subsequent inquiry: Monitoring should be linked with the detection of ethically significant discrepancies. Endorsement should be seen in the reasons given by teachers, and corrective regulation should be reflected in changes to their practice.

It is possible for a teacher to show one of these functions more clearly than the others. This kind of variation helps to explain why high ethical aspirations can at the same time be accompanied by inconsistent behaviour and shows where professional development can become involved.

Table 2 brings together the four propositions and shows the observable patterns that further research would be led to examine.

Table 2. Theoretical propositions and implications for subsequent inquiry.

Proposition	Proposed relationship	Mechanism	Expected pattern in university teaching
P1: Ethical visibility	Monitoring supports internalization when discrepancies are connected to personally binding responsibilities.	Attention makes the ethical significance of practice explicit.	Teachers identify who is affected and explain why a discrepancy matters professionally.
P2: Autonomous endorsement	External expectations become internal standards through endorsement of their professional justification.	Ownership of reasons guides judgment across competing obligations.	Teachers justify decisions through educational responsibilities and examine conflicting claims.
P3: Consequential correction	Internalization strengthens through feasible correction and evaluation of its consequences.	Action and feedback connect endorsed standards with changes in practice.	Teachers implement a remedy and reconsider it in light of affected persons' experiences.
P4: Institutional consistency	Consistent procedures and opportunities for deliberation strengthen the link between self-regulation and internalization.	Credible support enables teachers to acknowledge discrepancies and act on them.	Professional reasoning and correction receive consistent support across comparable cases.

Implications for university ethics education

University ethics courses can base their teaching on important decisions with consequences. Examples cover a range of practical concerns. These include assessment fairness, the limits of supervision, the acknowledgement of contributors' work, and the protection of student confidentiality. For these matters, teachers need to identify all affected parties. They must also clarify the competing duties at stake and justify the actions they take. The aim of this education is to make the reasoning that professionals use clear and accessible for examination.

The mechanism leads to three related practices. The first is that teachers should look for patterns in a limited number of real decisions which are worthy of ethical consideration. The second involves organising case discussions so that the institution's requirements can be linked to their educational rationale. The third consists of holding a follow-up discussion to look at what changed, how the students who were affected experienced the response, and whether further amendments are required. Thus, the sequence provides ethical standards with repeated practical application.

The feedback systems should ensure that corrections are both possible and accountable. Teachers should have access to sources where they can get advice, deal with unclear situations, and report ongoing organizational problems. Departments must be able to tell the difference between a genuine attempt to make things right and concealment and should check whether the suggestions put forward take into account the interests in question. It is especially important to consider students' views when there is a discrepancy between the teachers' intentions and the students' experiences.

The evaluation must align with the mechanism. Taking part in training shows that one has been exposed to ethical expectations. With regard to more informative evidence, attention should be paid to the quality of the professional justification, the manner in which credible feedback is responded to, and the documented changes made to consequential practices. These criteria focus on the development of ethical agency in the course of ordinary academic work.

Conclusion

Teacher ethics become internalized to the extent that the professional standards gain authority in the teachers'

own thinking and are consistently put into practice. The article states that this development takes place through a cycle which involves ethical self-monitoring, professional self-judgment, and corrective self-reaction. Four propositions describe how specific discrepancies, autonomous endorsement, consequential correction, and support that is consistent with the institution contribute to the process. This framework centres the practical exercise of professional judgment within university ethics education. Ethical standards become internalized when educators apply them thoughtfully. Such application must be justified and open to revision, especially for decisions that affect students and colleagues.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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