

University Contribution to Developing the Moral Standards of Students: A Synthesis of European Research

The ethical standards of university graduates, who become the future leaders and actors in business and society, are of critical importance. High-profile corporate scandals at the turn of the century serve as stark reminders of the societal consequences that arise when professional ethics fail. These events underscore the practical urgency of understanding how the moral frameworks of future professionals are formed during their university education. Universities are broadly expected to be more than just centers for teaching and research. They are seen as institutions where “values and beliefs are transferred”, preparing students for the ethical dimensions inherent in their future professional careers. This societal mandate implies a responsibility not only to impart specialized knowledge but also to cultivate the moral character and judgment necessary for graduates to navigate complex professional environments.

A central academic question is whether universities actively shape student morality or primarily serve as a sorting mechanism. This debate revolves around two primary mechanisms of influence:

an education effect, where the university's curriculum, teaching, and social environment actively influence and change a student's ethical ideology;

a selection effect, where academic programs attract students who already possess specific moral orientations, and where the university experience filters out those who do not align with the program's implicit values.

Understanding the interplay of these two effects is crucial for determining the true nature and extent of the university's contribution to moral development.

The purpose of this article is to synthesize and analyze the empirical findings from two comprehensive studies (one focusing on Ukrainian students [6] and another on Swedish students [5]) to build a cohesive understanding of how higher education contributes to the development of moral standards. By comparing research from two

different European nations, this synthesis aims to identify consistent patterns and offer a more nuanced perspective on the university's role.

To effectively analyze this role, it is first necessary to establish a clear theoretical framework for understanding moral orientation and its development.

To systematically analyze the university's impact on student ethics, it is essential to define the key theoretical constructs that underpin the research. The research is grounded in the taxonomy of ethical ideologies [1], which conceptualizes moral orientation along two fundamental dimensions:

idealism refers to the extent to which an individual believes that moral actions should always consider the welfare of others and avoid causing harm. Individuals with high idealism are guided by the principle of striving for positive outcomes for all;

relativism refers to the extent to which an individual rejects the existence of universal moral principles, believing instead that moral judgments are dependent on the specific situation and context.

Critically, these are two independent dimensions, not opposite ends of a single continuum. An individual can score high or low on either dimension, creating a two-dimensional space for mapping moral orientation.

The moral profile of a university's student body is the cumulative result of two dynamic processes, as modeled by Collin & Schmidt [5]:

1) the selection process encompasses choices made by both the student and the institution. It includes a student's self-selection in choosing a program, as well as the decision to exit a program. It also includes the university's selection through admission requirements, examinations, and other academic hurdles that determine a student's continuation;

2) the educational process involves the direct and indirect influence of the academic experience. This includes the explicit content of the curriculum, the implicit values embedded in teaching materials and faculty discourse, and the socialization that occurs through interactions with peers and instructors.

Together, these processes of selection and education shape the ethical ideologies of students from their entry into the university until their graduation.

With this theoretical framework established, we can now turn to the empirical evidence from the Ukrainian and Swedish studies.

By examining two distinct European contexts (Ukraine and Sweden) a more robust and nuanced picture of the university's influence on student morality emerges. The findings from these studies reveal remarkably consistent patterns, suggesting that certain dynamics of moral development in higher education may transcend cultural and institutional differences.

Both studies unequivocally identify a student's academic major as a significant predictor of their ethical ideology. The Ukrainian study by Mykolenko et al. [6] compared students in a Business & Economics (B&E) program with those in a Translation & Interpreting (T&I) program. They found that the educational program significantly influenced students' ethical orientation, particularly their idealism. The Swedish study by Collin & Schmidt [5] contrasted students in an Accounting & Auditing (AA) program with those in Banking & Finance (BF). They also found significant differences, with AA students demonstrating a distinct moral profile compared to their BF counterparts.

The convergence of these findings is significant. The pattern holds true even when comparing different program types: a professional business program versus a humanities-oriented program in Ukraine, and two distinct professional specializations within business in Sweden. This strengthens the conclusion that something inherent to the process of professional socialization within business education, rather than a generic "university effect", is a primary driver of students' moral orientation.

A key contribution of both studies is the examination of how ethical ideology changes over the course of a degree program, revealing distinct developmental trajectories. The Swedish study provided clear evidence of a consistent increase in idealism among Accounting & Auditing (AA) students, whose average score rose

smoothly from 5.08 in Year 1 to 5.99 in Year 3. Idealism among their Banking & Finance (BF) peers remained more stable over the same period. The Ukrainian research, in contrast, revealed a more volatile but ultimately upward trend for Business & Economics (B&E) students. Their idealism score dipped in the third and fifth years of study before rising sharply by the final year, suggesting a non-linear and potentially turbulent developmental path.

Synthesizing these temporal findings points to a combined selection and education effect. The consistent increase in idealism for Swedish AA students and the eventual increase for Ukrainian B&E students suggest that the university environment reinforces and develops certain moral orientations by the time of graduation. However, the different trajectories highlight that this development is not always a simple linear progression and can be shaped by the specific curriculum and professional context.

A striking consistency across both studies is the finding that university education has a more significant and measurable impact on idealism than on relativism. In both the Ukrainian and Swedish analyses, the statistical regression models predicting idealism were frequently significant and explained a notable portion of the variance. Conversely, the models for relativism often lacked statistical significance and had very low explanatory power (indicated by low adjusted R^2 values). Both research teams acknowledge that this is a common feature in studies using the Ethics Position Questionnaire (EPQ). This suggests that relativism may be more situation-dependent and thus harder to measure reliably with survey instruments, or that it is a more deeply ingrained trait less susceptible to the influences of higher education.

Beyond the primary effects of academic program and time, both studies identified several control variables that significantly predicted ethical ideology. Gender emerged as a consistent predictor in both Ukraine and Sweden, with female students generally scoring higher on idealism than their male counterparts. The Ukrainian study identified additional factors, finding that well-being was positively correlated with idealism and that students living with a partner were more idealistic than single students. The

consistency of gender as a predictor of idealism across two distinct national and cultural contexts suggests it is a robust demographic factor in moral orientation. In contrast, other variables like well-being and relationship status, identified only in the Ukrainian study, may be more culturally specific or simply require further cross-cultural investigation. These empirical trends provide a solid foundation for a broader discussion of their meaning and consequences for higher education.

The cumulative evidence from these European studies strongly suggests that universities are not neutral environments but are, in fact, active agents in the moral development of their students. This influence, whether intentional or not, carries significant implications for educational policy and practice.

The observed changes in moral orientation occurred in academic programs that did not have specific, mandatory ethics courses. This finding points toward a powerful implicit ethical education embedded within the standard curriculum. The influence appears to operate through professional socialization, where the values of a field are transmitted subtly. For instance, the implicit curriculum of an Accounting & Auditing program, with its inherent emphasis on professional codes, rules, and public trust, appears far more effective at fostering idealism than a Banking & Finance track, which may implicitly prioritize shareholder value and situational profit maximization. This demonstrates that the substantive content and professional ethos of a discipline can shape moral orientation even without explicit ethical instruction.

Both research projects utilized a quasi-longitudinal (or cross-sectional) design, surveying students at different year levels at a single point in time. This approach cannot definitively distinguish a true educational effect from a potential cohort effect, as it is possible that the Year 3 students surveyed had different baseline characteristics upon entry than the Year 1 students surveyed. Furthermore, as each study was conducted in a single country, the findings may be culturally bounded.

The practical value of these findings is substantial. If universities are already influencing students' ethical ideologies, then a more conscious and deliberate approach

is warranted. As Mykolenko et al. suggest [6], academic communities and policymakers should recognize this capacity and consider how to foster positive moral development more intentionally. Rather than allowing this influence to be an unintended byproduct of professional training, universities can adopt more explicit ethical policies and integrate ethical considerations more thoughtfully into their teaching practices. This leads to a fundamental question about the ultimate goal of a university's role in the moral sphere.

This synthesis of research has demonstrated that universities contribute directly to the development of students' moral standards. The evidence is clear that this influence is achieved through a powerful combination of student selection into specific programs and the subsequent educational experience within those programs. This effect is particularly pronounced in professionally-oriented fields like business and accounting and manifests most strongly in the fostering of idealism – a foundational component of ethical behavior.

The findings compel us to move beyond asking if universities shape morality and toward asking how they should do so. As Collin & Schmidt compellingly articulate [5], this raises a profound question for higher education: should the goal be to instill a specific, professionally-sanctioned moral orientation in students? Or, in the true spirit of the Enlightenment, should universities focus on strengthening each student's independent capacity for moral reasoning and judgment, empowering them to forge their own robust ethical frameworks?

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Коллін Свен-Олоф. Вплив університету на розвиток моральних стандартів студентів: синтез європейських досліджень.

На основі синтезу результатів емпіричних досліджень з двох різних європейських контекстів, розглянуто механізми, за допомогою яких вища освіта здійснює вплив на формування моральних стандартів студентів. Основний висновок полягає в тому, що університетські програми суттєво впливають на етичну ідеологію студентів. Цей вплив найбільш виражений у вимірі ідеалізму,

турботи про благополуччя інших, і зумовлений поєднанням ефекту відбору, коли програми приваблюють студентів з уже існуючими моральними орієнтаціями, та ефекту освіти, коли академічне середовище підкріплює та розвиває ці орієнтації з часом. На основі проведеного аналізу обґрунтовано висновок, що університети мають значний, і часто неявний, вплив на моральний розвиток майбутніх фахівців, що порушує важливі питання щодо їхньої інституційної відповідальності в цій сфері.

Ключові слова: університет, студенти, етична ідеологія, ідеалізм, релятивізм, академічна спеціальність, благополуччя.

Collin Sven-Olof Yrjö. University Contribution to Developing the Moral Standards of Students: a Synthesis of European Research.

The article addresses the central question of the university's role in shaping the moral standards of its students. Synthesizing empirical research from two distinct European contexts it examines the mechanisms through which higher education exerts its influence. The core finding across both studies is that university programs, particularly those in business and accounting, significantly influence students' ethical ideology. This impact is most pronounced on the dimension of idealism, the concern for the welfare of others, and is driven by a combination of a selection effect, where programs attract students with pre-existing moral orientations, and an education effect, where the academic environment reinforces and develops these orientations over time. The analysis concludes that universities have a significant, and often implicit, impact on the moral development of future professionals, raising important questions about their institutional responsibility in this domain.

Key words: university, students, ethical ideology, idealism, relativism, academic major, well-being.