

# Student Learning and Assessment: What are the Personal Values of Students?

**Ilse Lubbe (University of Cape Town)**

At the beginning of 2020, no one expected or was prepared for the impact that a global pandemic would have on our professional and personal lives. Students were sent home for remote delivery of courses, while academics were required to teach online, and for many this was for the very first time. Classroom-based teaching was converted to online or e-learning, resulting in a fair degree of stress and uncertainty for academics and students (Sangster, et al., 2020). Suddenly, students were required to self-learn and to manage their own engagement.

Neither academics nor students were ready for this immediate pivot to online learning. Managing the transition has presented several challenges to students, educators, and universities. Urgent interventions included training in the use of computers and online learning platforms and proficiency in utilising e-learning assessments by staff and students. In short, what we thought we knew about learning and assessment changed overnight, and these changes are likely permanent (Li & Lalina, 2020).

The stress of meeting learning outcomes, engaging sufficiently with the extended content, combined with the pressure on students to perform, resulted in students taking 'shortcuts', specifically in online assessments. During the remote delivery period, students were allowed extended time to take assessments from home, with limited or no invigilation, relying on honesty declarations by students. However, students are driven by marks, and assessment provides marks. With the urgent switch to online assessments, and students being required to demonstrate their knowledge online, came the challenge of unethical behaviour by students.

This study uses a scoping review to compare and analyse students' performance in venue-based assessments compared to online assessments in accounting courses at UCT<sup>1</sup>. Venue-based exams were primarily undertaken during the 2016 to 2019 academic years, while several online exams were undertaken in 2020. Interviews conducted with accounting academics emphasised the challenges of preparedness for and integrity of online assessments in the 2020 academic year.

Ethical relativism holds that what is right or wrong depends on the moral norms of the society in which it is practiced. However, what is considered good or bad behaviour should be determined beyond what is currently the norm. Cheating in an exam cannot be wrong because someone said so, it is wrong by our own reason and conscience. While ethics is seen as internally based and value-driven, in education a compliance approach is often adopted (Lund Dean & Beggs, 2006; Cant & Kulik, 2010). Compliance means adhering to the rules, but *what happens if no one is watching?* The recent unethical behaviour by political and business leaders impresses a culture and practice of self-interest.

The over-emphasis on assessment creates a situation that requires students to make an ethical decision, thereby emphasising the notion of personal values and ethical behaviour (Sheehan & Schmidt, 2015). At the end of the second year of remote teaching comes the realisation that digital transformation of teaching, learning and assessment is inevitable. The challenge is no longer about written versus online assessment, but the development of equitable online assessment that entrenches ethical values and graduate attributes that are required now more than ever.

[520 words]

<sup>1</sup> Ethical approval was obtained for this study.

Questions for engagement:

*What does it mean for a student to take responsibility for his or her own learning, and to act honestly and with integrity?*

*How can we deepen students' ethical sensitivity and enable them to develop their personal values, and to improve their understanding of making ethical decisions in any situation?*

References:

Cant, C. & Kulik, B.W. (2010). More than lip service: The development and implementation plan of an ethics decision-making framework for an integrated undergraduate business curriculum. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 7, pp. 231-254.

Li, C., & Lalani, F. (2020, April 29). *The COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever. This is how*. Retrieved 25 September 2021, from World Economic Forum: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online-digital-learning/>

Lund Dean, K. & Beggs, J.M. (2006). University professors and teaching ethics: Conceptualizations and expectations. *Journal of Management Education*, 30, pp. 99-109.

Sangster, A., Stoner, G., & Flood, B. (2020). Insights into accounting education in a COVID-19 world. *Accounting Education*, 29(5), pp. 431-562.

Sheehan, N.T., Schmidt, J.A. (2015). Preparing accounting students for ethical decision making: Developing individual codes of conduct based on personal values. *Journal of Accounting Education*, 33, pp. 183-197.