

# **Attitudes Do Not and Cannot Change Overnight! Investigating Attitudes Towards Business Ethics at the University of Malawi**

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**Abstract.** The study investigated the difference of attitudes towards business ethics between students who have studied a business ethics course (n=88) and those who have not (n=94) at the University of Malawi in Malawi. It was hypothesised that students who had undergone the course would have more positive attitudes towards business ethics than those who had not. We employed the Attitudes towards Business Ethics Questionnaire (ATBEQ) and used t-test to measure the difference. The results were surprising as most items (23/30) showed no significant difference in attitudes towards business ethics by students who had undergone the course from those who had not. Out of the seven that showed significant difference, five of the items showed more positive attitude towards business ethics by those students who had undergone the course than those students who had not. This shows that there is something positive as regards the methods of teaching business ethics at the University, but requires leveraging. The paper concludes by recommending three leveraging points that the University of Malawi can adopt in teaching a business ethics course.

**Keywords:** business ethics, Malawi, attitudes, teaching methods.

## **1. Introduction**

In 2013, Malawi experienced one of the worst corruption scandals in its modern history, which was dubbed *cashgate*<sup>1</sup>. In this crisis, billions of Malawian Kwachas were siphoned from public institutions by public servants together with some business tycoons. In addition, newspapers every month report cases of fraud, corruption and mismanagement of public funds. For several years now Transparency International has placed Malawi high on its list of most corrupt countries in the world. According to the 2018 report, Malawi was placed in position 122 out of 180 countries<sup>2</sup> (Transparency International 2018). Malawians

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1. Cash-gate refers to a case that involved Civil Servants in the Malawi Government, who plundered over USD 250 million of public funds.

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feel that the office of the president is the most corrupt (43%), followed by the police service (39%), business executives (35%), government officials (34%) and then traditional leaders (30%); while religious leaders are thought to be least corrupt (15%) (Afrobarometer 2014). Further, the same Afrobarometer findings suggest a widespread public perception that the country is failing in its fight against corruption and popular perceptions of corruption are high and increasing over time (Chunga and Mazalale 2017). Further Chunga and Mazalale (2017) note that half of citizens believe that ordinary people can make no difference in the fight against corruption and a lot of Malawians feel the government is performing poorly in fighting corruption.

The conclusion one may make from these observations is that either Malawian culture has no regard or concern for ethics, or that there has been a gradual loss of the concept of the ethical or the moral in contemporary Malawi. Equally problematic is the teaching and promotion of business ethics by universities and in organizations respectively. As the crises are largely driven by business decisions and a lack of appropriate ethical action, the question arises as to how ethics can be inculcated in organisations' decision-making processes. We think that faculties of accounting, economics, finance, management and philosophy, can better integrate business ethics into their courses so that a culture of corruption and the *cashgate* experience of the 2013 have less chance of being repeated.

This study therefore investigates the teaching of business ethics at the University of Malawi. It departs from the assumption that the methods of teaching business ethics at the University of Malawi are working. Why the focus on methods? There are four things to measure if the course is producing desirable effects: first is the instructor, second the course content, third is the method of delivery, fourth is the student. On the instructor, the course is handled by a business ethics expert<sup>3</sup> so he is aware of the ethical content. With regard to content, in its preliminary reading, the study found the content of the course to be comparable to other business ethics courses within the region (Barkhuysen & Rossouw 2008; Smurthwaite 2012). With regard to the student, this variable is constant as you can get both good and lazy students (ethical as well as unethical students) in the same class. With regard to methods, there are numerous methods of delivering business ethics courses, or any course in general. The study, thus aims to focus on the methods of teaching business ethics.

Now, in order to test its hypothesis, the study collected data on attitudes towards business ethics from students who had undergone the business ethics course and from those who had not. The assumption was that if the methods of teaching business ethics were working, then at minimal, students who have undergone the course will have a more positive attitude towards business ethics

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2. 1 being the least corrupt country and 180 being the most corrupt country.

3. We are aware of the debate of who should teach business ethics. We are of the view that a philosopher should handle the course. For more on this debate see McGowan, R. J. (2005).

than those who have not undergone the course. The paper starts by investigating the method used in delivering the business ethics course at the University of Malawi. Then we review literature on methods of teaching business ethics in other countries. This was done in order to contrast the method used in the University of Malawi with those used elsewhere. Then the paper reviews some studies that have measured attitudes to business ethics in Africa and beyond. The consequent sections present the rationale, methods and results of the current study. In conclusion, the study proposes three methods that can help to improve the delivery of business ethics at the University of Malawi, and other educational institutions within Malawi.

### 1.1. Rationale

The implications of understanding how students in Malawi react towards a range of ethical issues ought to have relevance for those involved in developing education courses, particularly in view of the current economic and business climate in Malawi, which has been characterized by corruption and inconsideration of ethics.

Studies into attitudes towards ethical issues in business have received little to no attention in Malawi. This present study will hopefully lead to more thoughtful discussion of these issues. The study will also inform on best possible pedagogical methods of teaching business ethics in Malawi and Africa in general.

The study is also important because it highlights the weaknesses of the rule-based model of teaching business ethics in particular and ethics in general. The study also highlights the models that have worked elsewhere that could be adapted to the African context and to elevate the African models of teaching business ethics.

## **2. Teaching of Business Ethics at the University of Malawi**

The teaching of business ethics at the University of Malawi started in 2008. Some of the study topics that are offered in the business ethics course at this institution include; the nature of Business Ethics, which looks mainly into issues like: ethics and business, business and economic systems, and corporate governance. There is also a topic on corporate responsibility, which looks into issues ranging from corporate social responsibility (CSR), stockholder theory and stakeholder theory. Corporate and internal ethics is another topic of study where code of ethics and human resource (HR) issues are tackled. Another topic is business and society, which looks into ethics, advertising and marketing, just pricing and supply chain and trade imbalances. Finally there is a topic on international business ethics/multinational enterprises. The course is allocated 3 hours per week in a 14-week