Articol

Adapting the University Ethical Climate, a Necessity in the Pandemic Context

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Abstract: *This paper aims to analyze the consequences of the pandemic crisis measures on the educational system, in terms of the university ethical climate, trying to provide solutions for creating and maintaining an optimal climate for learning and character development. The ethical organizational climate is at the core of the ethical decision-making, ethical behavior, and development in the university environment. The university ethical climate reflects the collective moral behaviors, facilitates commitment, respect for ethical norms and integrity of the parties involved in the educational process, leading to the development of an ethical culture of responsibility. In the context of the current pandemic, the educational solutions adopted, although effective in the short term, in the long run can impinge on the basic values the traditional school is built on. An open-door policy is needed more than ever in order to adapt to the new reality generated by the crisis, to keep universities in an area of moral authority, to avoid moral obscurantism and absenteeism, consequences of the evading the responsibility tendency, generated by the online school.*

Keywords: *university ethical climate, pandemic context, ethical culture, responsibility, character development*

Rezumat: *Lucrarea de față își propune să analizeze consecințele măsurilor crizei pandemice asupra sistemului educațional, în ceea ce privește climatul etic universitar, încercând să ofere soluții pentru crearea și menținerea unui climat optim de învățare și dezvoltare a caracterului. Climatul organizațional etic se află în centrul procesului de luare a deciziilor etice, al comportamentului etic și al dezvoltării în mediul universitar. Climatul etic universitar reflectă comportamentele morale colective, facilitează angajamentul, respectul pentru normele etice și integritatea părților implicate în procesul educațional, conducând la dezvoltarea unei culturi etice a responsabilității. În contextul actualei pandemii, soluțiile educaționale adoptate, deși eficiente pe termen scurt, pe termen lung pot afecta valorile de bază pe care se construiește școala tradițională. Este nevoie mai mult ca oricând de o politică de uși deschise pentru a se adapta la noua realitate generată de criză, pentru a menține universitățile într-o zonă de autoritate morală, pentru a evita obscurantismul și absenteismul moral, consecințe ale sustragerii tendinței de responsabilitate, generate de scoala online.*

Cuvinte cheie: *climatul etic universitar, contextul pandemic, cultura etică, responsabilitatea, dezvoltarea caracterului*

1. The ethical climate in universities. Theoretical framework

Ethics generally include impartiality in the performance of duties and resistance to corruption. In the university environment, ethics implies, among other things, the same obligations on the part of all its members. A dictionary definition for "ethics, ethical" shows us that the usual meanings are: 1. S.Theoretical study of basic principles and concepts in any field of practical thinking and activity. 2. S. Set of rules in relation to which a human group regulates its behavior in order to distinguish what is legitimate and acceptable in achieving goals; moral. 3.Adj. Regarding ethics (1), ethics, based on ethics, according to ethics; moral. (DEX, 1998)

"*The field of ethics is the study of how we try to live our lives according to a standard of "right" or "wrong" behavior - in both how we think and behave toward others and how we would like them to think and behave toward us.*" (Ghillyer, 2010).

Integrity is a path that is distinguished by the fact that it is fair and secure. Only by following this path of ethical integrity, do we not risk becoming the subjects of illicit deeds, by concretely engaging in various forms of legal liability. Same dictionary (DEX, 1998) define integrity as: s.1. Learning to be honest; honesty, probity; incorruptibility.2. The property of being or remaining intact, whole .

Values are used to develop rules that are socially applied within an organization. Integrity, responsibility and trust are examples of such fundamental values (Ferrell et al., 2011). An ethical culture is rooted in an organization's value system. (Grojean, Resick, Dickson, & Smith, 2004).

Ethical behaviors in an organization are reflected in a wide range of conducts and attitudes including mutual respect, loyalty to the goals and values of the organization, a sense of duty, discipline, punctuality and importance given to moral standards, communication, socialization and organizational performance.

The *moral norm* represents the duty of every free conscience, which imposes on man to wish, through everything he does or thinks, to be human at the highest level of his possibilities (Mihăilescu, 2019). The specific role of moral norms is the optimization of the human condition and through it, a maximum of socialization.

Climate refers to the atmosphere, mood or feeling, predominant in an organization. We define the ethical climate as the shared perception of norms, values, and practices regarding appropriate ethical behavior by the employees of an organization, influencing their decision making and behavioral response to ethical dilemmas. The *organizational climate* expresses the perceptions shared by employees that reflect the way they perceive and describe the organizational culture: "*Climate is often regarded as the way things are around here*" (Vardi, 2001).

Victor and Cullen's (1988) theoretical research on the ethical climate became the foundation of studies of the ethical climate in organizations. Victor and Cullen's Ethical Climate Theory (ETC) is based on Kohlberg's (1981, 1984) work on moral development and Schneider's (1983) work on the organizational climate. They define ethical climate as "*the shared perception of what is correct behavior and how ethical situations should be handled in an organization*" (Victor & Cullen, 1987), or "*the prevailing perceptions of typical organizational practices and procedures that have ethical content*" (Victor & Cullen, 1988). An ethical organizational climate will reflect employees' perceptions of the ethical values and practices of their organizations.

The ethical philosophical framework of ECT includes the following three ethical theories: egoism, utilitarianism, and deontology. There can be several types of ethical climate in an organization*:*

1. *The egoistic ethical climate* - employees' perception that the employer organization generally promotes decisions of personal interest to the detriment of others (Al-Omari, 2012);
2. *The utilitarian ethical climate* - employees' perception that the employing organization has a personal interest in the well-being of others (Victor & Cullen, 1988);
3. *The deontological ethical climate* - the employee perceives that the employing organization is guided by principles, rules and laws (Al-Omari, 2012).

Ethical climates have been shown to have a variety of effects, some positive and some negative, on the ethical behavior. The literature shows that ethical behavior is linked to the ethical climate perceived by employees, and that the ethical climate can be a predictor of their ethical behavior. An ethical climate causes the employee to think more about moral issues, providing a basis for reasoning about what is right to do in various situations; reasoning that is most likely to turn into ethical behavior.

Studying the ethical climate in universities serves to measure and predict ethical behavior in higher education institutions and as an effective strategy for the higher education leadership to better manage the ethical behavior of their employees.

The higher education institution should cultivate an ethical climate based on trust, cultivated and maintained through *respect, responsibility, fairness, tolerance, benevolence, care*, and establish ethical training, mentoring and communication programs to produce positive ethical decisions and a ethical behavior in its employees, in order to maximize the social benefits of institutions and their stakeholders.

We consider that the role of a modern university is not only to train specialists and researchers, but also civilized, cultivated people, people of character, who respect their peers and institutions, as moral people. An immoral university environment favors the formation of immoral people, while a moral university environment will

produce moral people. We also believe that students are not and should not be transformed into objects of education, clients or civic associates of teachers, but partners in the common approach of training for performance, increased knowledge and values.
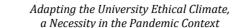
It is obvious and unanimously accepted that the organizational environment or context directly influences the moral behavior (s) of the members of an organization. Universities need to develop an ethical environment and ethical practices at the institutional level, in order to expect ethical behaviors at the individual level. As such, the attention must be directed to the ethics of the university as a whole, and then to the ethics of its members.

2. Implications and challenges of the pandemic context on the university ethical climate

The Covid-19 crisis has raised many ethical issues at the institutional level, calling into question the functionality of the traditional education system. The new challenges have prioritized issues such as compliance with hygiene and health standards, health care, protection of employees and students, the duty to prevent the spread of the disease, to detect and treat, to compensate, to care, to inform. In the latter case, scientific knowledge and technology have provided effective solutions. From a human point of view, however, the Covid pandemic is in itself an extraordinary ethical dilemma, and a test for all humanity in terms of global collaboration, crisis management, technology and expertise, decision making, allocation of funds, etc.

In 2019, the *Morality and Ethics Advisory Group* (MEAG) was established in order to provide independent advice to the government on ethical issues related to health and social assistance. Since the beginning of the pandemic, MEAG has offered solutions to the moral and ethical issues generated by the Covid-19 health crisis. At the level of university, the principles of respect, fairness, impartiality, equal opportunities have been put forward, especially to facilitate decision-making and the management of individual situations.

The basic principle was *equal concern and respect* for all those involved in the educational and research act. This implies the need to keep people informed about the decisions made and to honor their contribution. Good, respectful communication is fundamental in this regard, in order to ensure that people receive adequate counseling and preparation for change, continuous adaptation and possible new directions or additional responsibilities. A second principle is *minimization of harm* caused by the crisis and here we refer to the physical, psychological, social and economic damage caused to individuals. The third principle, of *fairness*, imposes equity as a coordinating principle of the activities of students and staff, regardless of

their nature. The principle of *reciprocity* implies that those who are required to take on greater responsibilities such as adapting the content of the teaching and teaching to the online mode should be adequately supported and rewarded by the authorities (Jones, 2020).

What is highlighted here is the emphasis placed on the respect due to all those involved in the educational act and the concern that all individuals, both students and staff be treated equally and equitably.

Beyond the benefits of the technological advancement, the collective enthusiasm to be connected audio and video on educational platforms, the easy distribution of teaching materials and interactive topics, the confusion with traditional education is ethically dangerous.

The ethical issues faced by the Online School Program, the impact on academic integrity, have been reported around the world. The detected problems are not few, ranging from those related to academic honesty, plagiarism and intellectual property, to fraud, collective cheating, gang behavior, fictitious presence, negligence, disrespect. There has been an increase in cases of copying, exchange of information and cheating, especially during exams. The general attitude is one of indifference or lack of interest because students no longer prioritize education over other aspects of their lives. Online education has created an environment permissive to the free distribution of various materials, videos and lectures, without the consent of their author. The lack of direct interaction made students feel less responsible and interested in the integrity and quality of their work. The result was: negligence in solving tasks, unfinished homework, copy-paste solutions, sending answers to other colleagues, alternative pages open for reading during exams, Google Search answers, etc.

Another aspect is related to the unequal treatment or discrimination of those who do not have access to the Internet or who share the same device, and between those familiar with the online environment and those who do not master the electronic means of communication. Thus, a major obligation that occurs is to avoid any inequality resulting from the unavailability of resources.

A problem faced by universities around the world is whether students who study online should pay the same fees as if they were on campus and receive personal training (Barkan, 2020, Demuyakor, 2020, Massa, 2020, Young, 2020). The ethical question we must ask ourselves is: if tuition fees are not reduced to reflect these losses, aren't students overburdened and treated unfairly?

Regardless of the decisions taken by the institutions in order to compensate for the lack of direct interaction, the experience of being a student, the experience of the campus, the relationship with colleagues, teachers, international students, playing sports, etc, were lost, thus, the chance to receive a multilateral, diverse education was certainly diminished.

3. Solutions for the ethical climate in the university of the 21st century

The university environment must become a truly democratic environment based on normative regulation and implementation. Today, among other values, are recognized by regulation as university values the following (Carta, 2016): *personal autonomy – art 108*, *respect* and *tolerance - art 114*, *goodwill* and *care - art 115*, necessary in such an environment, though, unfortunately, to a small extent understood and followed.

The university will truly become the main engine of the development of a society and the well-being of its members only if the values enshrined in internal regulations are promoted; if intellectual work and scientific creation are stimulated; each member acts sincerely and correctly; acts of corruption are penalized. Only under such conditions, the future *elite* of the state can be prepared.

We believe that the social status of a society is largely determined by the economic, intellectual and moral status of universities; the skills acquired by students during their studies should be related to their future ethical and professional becoming, including behavior in public life and in the private one as well.

If, in universities, the culture of the institution is vitiated, in consequence, future students will reproduce and apply: fraud, manipulation, paternalism, influence peddling, the tendency to solve professional problems behind the scenes, will have an attitude of indifference towards colleagues and institution, a *clique behavior*, they will commit acts of corruption, abuse of office, nepotism, they will be permanently tempted to evade moral rules and legal norms.

In order to create a moral university, it is necessary for it to internalize a series of organizational virtues in all its internal practices and processes, so as to stimulate all members of the academic community to behave ethically and, at the same time, prevent their immoral behaviors. Therefore, a moral university is that which creates a moral context for its members, by developing organizational moral virtues.

We identified four imperative solutions for the ethical university of the 21st century, solutions that impose themselves as valid in any university context, namely: the *value-based leadership*, the *ethical training*, the *mentoring programs* and the *ongoing communication*.

A *values-based leadership* is one that inspires "*cooperative personal decisions by creating faith in common understanding, faith in the probability of success, faith in the ultimate satisfaction of personal motives, and faith in the integrity of common purpose.*" (Barnard, 1939). Leadership creates and sets the norm in any organization and it is the first responsible for establishing the adequate ethical climate and the efficient communication among the employees. An efficient leadership:

- is a value based, ethical leadership;

- uses the power of personal example;
- establishes clear expectancies and behavior norms;
- produces feed-back;
- offers coaching and support;
- acknowledges and rewards the achievements and behaviors that enforce the organizational culture;
- is non-discriminatory and aware of the individual differences among the employees;
- establishes ethical training and mentoring programs.

Ethical training is an essential part in the effort of ensuring a positive ethical climate within an organization. An effective ethical training programme will:

1. *Reinforce the organization's culture and standards;*
2. *Focus on the organization's unique ethical problems;*
3. *Discuss and solve the particular ethical dilemas ;*
4. *Integrate ethical studies into the entire curriculum.*

The mentoring programs will teach the undergraduate or graduate student not only the method of scientific enquiry in academic research but also the values associated with the responsible conduct of research (Horner and Minifie, 2011). They will be responsible with and provide counseling in the following:

1. *Explaining the fundamental ethical and deontological values;*
2. *Providing support in solving personal and organizational ethical dilemmas;*
3. *Encouraging ethical behavior.*

Mentorship programs will prepare students to solve ethical dilemmas within organizations and avoid negative consequences of non-ethical behavior, improve ethical thinking, moral awareness and ethical leadership. Mentors must also provide guidance in writing scientific papers, presentations in professional conferences or public communications, securing of research grants.

Last but not least, *ongoing communication* is necessary for enabling the transfer and reinforcement of the organizational values. We consider as vital for the perpetuation of an the ethical climate the following:

1. *Consistent communication on the fundamental ethical and deontological values;*
2. *Periodically reminding and revising the Ethical Code of the university;*
3. *All members' participation to the elaboration/ modification of the amendments of the University Ethical Codes.*

In 1999, the National Communication Association officially adopted the Credo for Ethical Communication. The NCA Credo for Ethical Communication considers as essential for the ethics of human communication the following principles:

"We advocate truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason as essential to the integrity of communication.

We endorse freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and tolerance of dissent to achieve the informed and responsible decision making fundamental to a civil society.

We strive to understand and respect other communicators before evaluating and responding to their messages.

We promote access to communication resources and opportunities as necessary to fulfill human potential and contribute to the well-being of families, communities, and society.

We promote communication climates of caring and mutual understanding that respect the unique needs and characteristics of individual communicators.

We condemn communication that degrades individuals and humanity through distortion, intimidation, coercion, and violence, and through the expression of intolerance and hatred.

We are committed to the courageous expression of personal convictions in pursuit of fairness and justice.

We advocate sharing information, opinions, and feelings when facing significant choices while also respecting privacy and confidentiality.

We accept responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences of our own communication and expect the same of others" (NCA, 1999).

Truthfulness and honesty are considered among the most important principles of ethical communication; thus, being open and transparent and adopting an open-door policy with other partner organizations and the media is key to professional trustworthiness and integrity, leading to a positive reputation and to the organization's visibility. Adopting the above-mentioned solutions within an organization will result in increased trust among the employees and alignment with the enterprise's code of conduct.

4. Conclusions

We conclude with some useful recommendations, generally valid for universities that are responsible of forming the *elite* of the society:

Firstly, the University Code of Professional Ethics and Ethics, enshrined in each university, is a set of consensual moral rules of members and functions as a moral

contract between the members of the academic community – art. 104, paragraph (1) and paragraph (2) (Carta, 2016). In order for the previously presented ones to materialize, it is important for all the members of the community to participate in the elaboration, and later in the modification of the university ethics codes, in the contexts that require it.

Secondly, we consider that the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, has generated unregulated situations yet, as such it is necessary to adapt the internal university regulations with the particularities outlined during the years 2020-2021.

Thirdly, although ethical and deontological values, such as: "*academic freedom, personal autonomy, justice and fairness, merit, academic honesty and intellectual fairness, transparency, personal, professional and social responsibility, respect and tolerance, goodwill and care*" (Carta, 2016), are enshrined in law, they are not explicit, we often find them only mentioned, leaving the possibility for the members of the academic community to bring them a personal and varied interpretation, which has led and will often lead to a violation of moral and legal rules.

Fourthly, we consider that it is not enough to post the Code of Ethics on the universities' website, its content must be periodically reiterated to the members of the academic community, especially if it requires or supports changes imposed at national or university level.

Fifth, in the context of university training and undergraduate programs, we consider it necessary that the discipline of *Ethics and academic integrity* become a compulsory discipline for students starting from the first year of study; today, it is one of the optional subjects, according to the ministerial order no. 3131 of 2018 (Ordin, 2018).

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