SIGNIFICANCE OF ETHICS EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONALS

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ABSTRACT

Maintaining high ethical standards amongst construction professions is crucial to the development of construction industry in Malaysia. Construction professionals must face challenges in the industry with ethical conducts and practices. However, the learning process for construction professionals emphasised on technical and performance knowledge with less regards on internalisation of ethics. Hence, the aim of this paper is to investigate the significance of ethics education and training for construction professionals. This is carried out through literature review of previous authors. From the literature review, it is shown that ethics education at elementary school and undergraduate levels for construction programs at colleges/universities, and supported by ethics training by professional bodies are significant to form the nucleus for construction professionals' moral setting in order to face the challenges of the industry.

Keywords: *Ethics, construction professionals*

INTRODUCTION

Competency for construction professional comprises of two elements - the actual performance of a required skill and, the personal attributes which underlie such performance (Birkhead *et al*., 2000). There is no doubt that technical knowledge in the required areas of a profession is crucial when working in the construction industry. However, Turner and Crawford (1992) asserted that the personal attributes of values and attitudes are more important than actual performance in influencing job success in the industry. They added that the contribution that these personal attributes make towards improving performance indicates a growing awareness on the personal characteristics.

According to Fox and Skitmore (2003), the importance of individual values, in particular, ethical conduct is an essential element in developing a better practice culture in the construction industry. Chan *et al.* (2002) also emphasized that the inclusion of ethics clearly acknowledges that values and morals are part of competency which enhances professional credibility. However, emphasis of learning for construction professionals is on technical and performance knowledge which is regarded a necessity, with less regard on internalisation of ethical values and conduct.

A high standard of behaviour and social responsibility is expected of construction professionals when they exercise their expertise, judgement and supervisory accountability over the management or implementation of a construction project (HKEDC, 2003). The main responsibility for construction professionals is towards clients and the

public, hence, it is crucial to consider necessary approaches to internalise and establish ethical values and conduct into them. Hence, the aim of this paper is to investigate the significance of ethics education and training for construction professionals. In order to provide an understanding on ethics, this chapter will firstly introduce the concepts of ethics with regards to the definition of ethics, professions and professional ethics. Literature review will then explore the significance of ethics education and training in general, with focus on construction professionals, as identified by previous authors internationally and in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concepts of Ethics

Definition of Ethics, Professions and Professional Ethics

Ethics relates to morals as it is the branch of philosophy that deals with moral behaviour (Abuznaid, 2009). Ethics are defined as, a set of moral values and principles, which form the standards guiding the code of conduct of individuals, organisations and professions (Institute of Integrity in Malaysia, IIM, 2004) and the concept of morals - one's ability to choose between right and wrong, good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable (Velasquez, 2009). In its simplest form, ethics is the conception of what is right and fair conduct or behaviour (Freeman and Gilbert, 1988).

Ethical behaviour involves the way you act even when people aren't looking and includes doing the right thing, showing concern for people and treating people right, being open and communicative, and demonstrating morality in one's personal life (Trevino *et al*., 2000). Being ethical involves taking action to ensure that these practices and rules are applied consistently in all day-to-day business situations (Orme and Ashton, 2003).

In the Islamic context, terms like goodness, rightness, justice, truth, right, and piety have been described as '*salihat'* or goodness, and impious actions are described as '*sayyi'at*' or evil (Abuznaid, 2009). As Islam is a way of life, all these are related to every aspect of a Muslim's life including personal, family, social and business matters. The question of whether an act is considered a virtue or a vice is determined in the '*Qur'an*' and '*sunnah'*, which is derived from of the Prophet Muhammad's *'hadith'* (sayings) and actions; and there is no two ways about it (Alhabshi, 1993). Thus, in Islam the ethical concepts of right or wrong is already in place in the '*Qur'an*' and '*sunnah'* and all Muslims should abide by them.

The professions have always been linked with the notion of service (Vee and Skitmore, 2003). However, the essence of a profession is more than a service since it necessitates specialized knowledge. A profession is special training around a specific body of knowledge leading to an exclusive area of practice, the ideal of being learned, and a duty of social responsibility in how its members carry out their work (Grimshaw, 2001); and, are those forms of work involving advanced expertise, self-regulation, and concerted service to public good (Martin and Schinzinger, 2005).

Professionals are usually bound by a set of principles, attitudes or types of character dispositions that control the way the profession is practised (Vee and Skitmore, 2003).

This has been termed professional ethics (McDowell, 1991) - which ascribes moral responsibility not to a person in general but to professionals practising in a particular profession (Ho and Ng, 2003). Professional ethics concerns potential problems confronting members of a profession or group in their impact on society, with the implication that fairness should be attributed not only to clients, but also colleagues, and the public (Johnson, 1999). In this sense, professional ethics concerns the morality of the behaviour of professionals in their day-to-day practice.

Professional ethics is different from ethics - as it concerns the rightness of behaviour (Ho and Ng, 2003) and can be properly analysed only against a set of social values and a conception of the general role of professions in society (Vee and Skitmore, 2003). Professional ethics involves both moral and practical concepts since it tied up with more practical concepts and expectations from the public - like competence, responsibility, and willingness to serve the public (HKEDC, 1996). Hence, from the public's perspective, the general normative rules of conduct are now made more strict and specific to particular professions.

The building and engineering professionals - engineers, architects project managers and contractors (including quantity surveyors in Malaysia) have the fundamental right of professional conscience (Martin and Schinzinger, 1996). The ethical element in professional conduct cannot be ignored and the need for professions to be aware of ethical issues in the way they conduct themselves is an important element of their recognition (Grimshaw, 2001). Ethics need a structure - they need a policy, a code of practice, or a cultural understanding of the rules (Orme and Ashton, 2003). However, they also need individuals who can differentiate between right and wrong, people who can make ethical decisions and are assertive enough to make a stand by the decisions they make.

The following section is the literature review of the significance of ethics education and training for construction professionals.

Ethics Education

Early Education in Ethics

The quality of ethics can create a stable structure for building personal and professional success of an individual. The question is, do we develop our values through experience and education, or are they inherent from our early development?

Abuznaid (2009) proposed that some people believe that moral foundations for deciding what is right and what is wrong are formed in childhood, before even the age of six and eight, and nothing in later life significantly changes this moral foundation. Bishop (1992) contented that early education experiences and family influences are going to have the most impact on the integrity of individuals who will be future business leaders and their willingness and ability to be value driven. Similar views on early education is shown in a study carried out on construction professionals in Malaysia, where 96% of the respondents who were from the background of architects, engineers and quantity surveyors agreed that education in ethics should start from school (Mohamad, 2012). This shows that education from the elementary stage of an individual is important for future professionals' ethical behaviour, since ethical knowledge is a fundamental foundation of a sustainable society (Mohamad, 2012).

Ethics should not be separated from religion. Law, as well as ethics, was considered inseparable from religion, as every offence represented an act against the name of God (Lewis, 2001). According to Fuchs and Hofkirchner (2003), religious and moral education breeds and enhances individual knowledge and is a constitutive aspect of all social self-organisation. Thus, it is not surprising that 96% of respondent construction professionals surveyed in Malaysia agreed that religious and moral education is important in setting high ethical standards (Mohamad, 2012).

Learning the basic principles of ethics constitutes the first stage in the process of knowledge because it generates awareness with regard to the various ethical perspectives and various ethical challenges (Fuchs and Hofkirchner, 2003). While most moral values are learned in early life, there are several sound reasons why people should continue to study ethics. These reasons include the need to know what to do and decide to do it and personal commitment to choose what is right, and this continues to develop as one grows; and, some others believe that the study of ethics will definitely lead to ethical behaviour (Abuznaid, 2009). It is appropriate that the following discussion will review the next stage of ethics education in colleges and universities.

Undergraduate Ethics Education

Most would admit that professional value, integrity and competence of construction professionals would be developed deeply and firmly during their professional education and training in universities (Chan and Chan, 2002). Bishop (1992) urged that universities should take a critical look at their role in the ethical development of future professionals and to assume a leadership role in addressing society's conscientious professional decision making and actions. He added that universities should practice what they preach with regard to being responsive to environmental forces as the environmental demand for universities to contribute to ethical practice is being heard in an increasing and resolute voice.

In a survey on future global visions of engineering education by Sunthonkanokpong (2011), high ethical standards and a strong sense of professionalism comes in third ranking out of seven successful attributes for the engineering education graduates in 2020. In the US, the Accreditation Board of Engineering and Technology recommends the study of ethics - so that students acquire an understanding of professional and ethical responsibility (Bucciarelli, 2008). Such concerns should also apply to other professions in the construction industry.

The purpose of teaching ethics ought to be that of stimulating the moral imagination; developing skills in the recognition and analysis of moral issues; eliciting a sense of moral obligation and personal responsibility; and, learning both to tolerate and resist moral disagreement and ambiguity (Sims and Sims, 1991). Review of the literature examining whether college-level ethics courses and/or courses in which ethics is incorporated into course content have an impact on attitudes towards ethics - shows positive results. However, most ethics courses are conducted in business related courses such as in business course (Glenn, 1992) and accounting courses (Kerr and Smith, 1995). The course in business ethics improved students' abilities on recognition of ethical issues (Gautschi and Jones, 1998). There were also significant improvements in the moral reasoning skills of students after they sat in an engineering ethics course (Self and Ellison, 1998). As for the construction industry, Egbu (2004) confirms that more is needed on the education and training of construction personnel, which should reflect the nature of ethical scope as a very complex social dimension.

In the US and Hong Kong, concerns on unethical and malpractices in the construction industry have given rise to the emphasis on the inclusion of ethics in construction curricula (FMI/CMAA, 2004; HKEDC, 2003). Results of a study on ethics by Vee and Skitmore (2003) showed that there is a need to review the provision of professional ethics-related subjects or modules to construction related courses during the academic tenure of the professional to improve the knowledge of professional. The situation in Malaysia is similar, where 89% of the respondent construction professionals surveyed in Malaysia agreed that ethics related subjects in the present construction and engineering curriculum at college/university are inadequate and should be reviewed (Mohamad, 2012). Ethics should be studied because it is important, both in contributing to safe and useful technological 'products' and in giving righteous meaning to the construction professionals' endeavours (Mohamad, 2012).

Education in ethics serves to establish and reinforce existing values and encourage their application (Bishop, 1992). Clearly, educational institutions cannot accomplish the mission alone. It is unlikely that any educational intervention will result in a complete overhaul of a student's ethics. Therefore, in order to improve professional standards, there is a need to foster an ethical culture by enhancing education on ethics, not only for construction students, but including training of ethics for practitioners (Suen *et al*., 2007).

Ethics Training

Learning of ethics should not stop at education in college or university but should be continued during the construction professional's working life. Professionals who are essentially individuals come to work with different values, good and bad, which results in ethical and unethical practices. According to Friedson (1973), one of the first steps in promoting ethical behaviour of professionals is to ensure that the leaders of the professional community propound the importance of ethical conduct among its members.

The greatest imperative of professional bodies is their long-term role to ensure that the community receives value in the provision of professional services. Public status, maintenance of skills, ethical standards should remain the main objectives of professional institutions. According to Webster (1991), important characteristics of a professional group are based on a professional statute is to provide services to members in order to help them develop their own professionalism and establishing adequate performance and ethical conduct in a specific profession. In Malaysia, this role is taken up by the professional bodies of Board of Architects, Board of Engineers and Board of Quantity Surveyors, Malaysia, which regulate ethical conducts and practice of the respective professions.

Apart from technical qualification, a professional also requires ethical normative competence normally acquired through training. Among the solutions suggested by the FMI/CMAA (2004) survey in order to reduce or prevent unethical practices in the construction industry is to have more ethics training (Rick, 2005). Training implies certain dealings in which one has to make a choice among various options; and, choosing to solve a certain problem implies formulating a value judgement about the available alternatives - such choices are generally based on ethical decisions (Bergenhenegouwen, 1996).

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) has been increasingly receiving more attention in recent decades, as construction professionals are required to update themselves with new developments in the rapidly changing built environment (Chan and

Chan, 2002). CPD is a systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and skills, and development of personal qualities necessary for the execution of professional and technical duties throughout a practitioner's working life (RICS, 1993). The implementation of CPD training can be conducted in different approaches - through conferences, workshops, lectures and study for a qualification (Le Roux *et al*., 2004). Vee and Skitmore (2003) recommended that professional bodies in the construction industry should conduct CPD courses through working forums, discussion, talks and seminars which endorse professional ethics substance.

Ethical issues often occur during the training or working life of a professional; nevertheless, not all professional institutions make it compulsory for their members to attend or enrol in any ethics related training. Studies by Vee and Skitmore (2003) showed that during the post-working professional training, there is lack of professional ethics-related CPD seminars to complement the pre-work ones. In Malaysia, the situation is similar, where majority (85%) of the respondent construction professionals surveyed felt that there should be more ethics training at industry level imposed by professional bodies, by attending a set number of hours/activities of CPD every year (Mohamad, 2012). Thus, professional bodies in Malaysia must take the lead in promoting ethics in order to inculcate ethical behaviour among its members by conducting CPD ethics training.

Professionals need to keep themselves up-to-date and relevant to their clients and communities. CPD is expected to improve the public standing of construction professions (Mills *et al*., 2005) and as a means to develop service attitude and professionalism (Le Roux *et al*., 2004). Besides identifying and promoting the subject matter of ethics in CPD courses for its members, a healthy debate on the ethical problems facing a profession should be also initiated by the professional bodies that are seen as custodians of the professionals.

CONCLUSION

Professionals in the Malaysian construction industry namely architects, engineers and quantity surveyors must understand the concepts of ethics which defines the rules and practices on responsible conduct between individuals, professions in the industry and the public. It has practical importance with the professions in terms of their moral obligation and expectations towards the people that they work with - clients and co-workers; and, to whom their activities have an impact - the public in general. The literature review in this paper has shown that ethics education and training are significant to form the nucleus of construction professionals' moral setting.

The educational setting is an ideal place to learn and practice ethics as this is the environment that helps builds tomorrow's society. Thus, in view of this important aspect, ethics in individuals should be introduced and developed from a young age. This can be acquired at the early learning stage of elementary education at school. Further considerations on ethics have also established the significance of ethics education at colleges/universities undergraduate level and its positive outcomes for students. Hence, ethics related courses should be emphasised and included in the curriculum of construction programs in colleges/universities in Malaysia to help mould the standards of the professional behaviour in the construction industry.

In order to establish ethical behaviour, all construction professionals should understand and apply ethics in everyday practice. Therefore, the process of learning ethics should not stop at colleges/universities but should continue during the professionals

working life. The main function of professional bodies is to regulate the members conduct and discipline in accordance with the rules set up by them. However, they must also be responsible to take up the challenge to endorse the ethics substance by conducting CPD ethics training for their members. This is to ensure adequate performance and ethical conduct of the professionals especially when faced with ethical issues in order to face the challenges of the industry locally and internationally.

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