Can universities teach students to be good?

University marks a time when students take more responsibility for their educational journey. Is that the best time to impart values? Or the worst?

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University may be the best and the worst place to teach values. The best, because students are empowered to take real decisions with real consequences, the worst, because if they take a wrong turn it can derail their degree, their career or their life.

DO AS I DO, NOT AS I SAY

How one graph with this title is a dilemma for institutions whose primary function is educational. Thus change becomes most acute when a violation of community norms. In the past, in Singapore and elsewhere, there was a tendency to emphasise the educational aspect, leaving the role of giving second chances. That’s where ethics ethics, but it is hardly ideal—coming only after a transcription and too often precipitating the “heights” of an alleged perpetrator over the interests of victims. In cases of sexual misconduct, the balance has, appropriately, shifted such that “teaching moments” do not come at the expense of protecting other students. Ideally, of course, students would intercede and act to protect others from victimisation.

Authority figures should model the values in question, with faculty and staffing held to higher standards than our students, but operationalising ethics is the key objective. Of course, we are teaching them to be known, to know and be heard.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Philosophers from Plato to Confucius have grappled with the question of what we should be teaching. Plato designed to bring someone hearing a ring of invisibility would believe badly if they knew they could do whatever they wanted with impunity. Confucius argued that those who compliance with laws simply due to the fear of being punished will have this: “If we talk ethics and not to teach they may learn to think that they cannot teach in the world.”

Even if we admit new students into the hallowed halls, it rings true. When we are teaching the graduates of the institution, they should celebrate the fact that they no longer have to worry about my colleagues grading their work. From now on, they’re on their own.

When it comes to ethics, they will fail their future selves. This is no reason to give up. As Samuel Beckett wrote in one of his last pieces of prose, Writing works, “There is no end.” As matter, Try again. Fail again. Fail better.

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