



ETINED
Council of Europe
Platform on Ethics,
Transparency and
Integrity in Education



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General Teaching Council for Scotland

Volume 2
Ethical principles

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Introduction

The current document is the first of two on the initial development of the Council of Europe Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education. This first document focuses on “ethical principles” for education and the second document will focus on “ethical behaviour of all actors in education”.

The document begins by setting the context for this Council of Europe initiative (Chapter 1), and discussing the methodological approach taken (Chapter 2).

This document then argues for the importance of responding to issues of corruption in education not simply by adopting top-down, mechanistic measures, but by attempting to achieve transparency and integrity in education, based upon a commitment to fundamental positive ethical principles in professional and public life (Chapter 3).

The document moves on to explore some of the complexities involved in attempting to distinguish between materials on “ethical principles” and associated materials on “ethical behaviour of all actors in education”, and analyses a number of important documents produced by other organisations to review existing coverage of relevant approaches to “ethical principles” and “ethical behaviour” (Chapter 4).

The document then proposes a detailed list of relevant fundamental “ethical principles” for education. These are now presented in summary form here (with the full, referenced versions in Chapter 5 of the main text).

Ethical principles

The Council of Europe should state that: all actors involved in education should show an unswerving personal commitment to the following ethical principles.

Integrity

The principle of “integrity” can be defined as “[b]ehaviours and actions consistent with a set of moral and ethical principles and standards, embraced by individuals as well as institutions, that create a barrier to corruption” (Transparency International 2009).

This principle therefore links with the concept of ethics, defined as “[b]ased on core values, a set of standards for conduct in government, companies and society that guides decisions, choices and actions” (Transparency International 2009).

In addition to the general term, the more specific term “academic integrity” can be used to discuss the particular application of this principle in the context of higher education (HE).

Essentially, integrity can be seen as the connection between positive ethical principles and quality in education, and applies to all actors involved in education.

Honesty

This principle involves being “honest and trustworthy”. It means avoiding systematically any form of cheating, lying, fraud, theft, extortion or other dishonest behaviours.

Clearly, the principle also involves not engaging in behaviour of an actual criminal nature.

Truth

This principle involves the “unfettered pursuit of truth” and associated with this is the “free and open dissemination of knowledge” and “knowledge advancement”.

The principle also involves “critical analysis and respect for reasoned opinions” and respect for “free exchange of ideas and ... freedom of expression”.

In the context of HE, the principle of “truth” also relates to research, specifically the ethical conduct of research. Research should be based on academic integrity and social responsiveness and involve an obligation to disseminate research.

Of course, the principle of truth does not only apply to the HE research context, but to all aspects of education and to all actors in education.

Transparency

The principle of “transparency” can be defined as the characteristic of governments, companies, organisations and individuals of being open in the clear disclosure of information, rules, plans, processes and actions. As a principle, public officials, civil servants, the managers and directors of companies, and board trustees have a duty to act visibly, predictably and understandably to promote participation and accountability.

The principle of transparency can be applied specifically in an institutional context.

However, it is important to emphasise that the principle of transparency places a requirement for the open disclosure of information on all actors within the education system as individuals, not just on organisations.

Respect for others

The principle of “respect for others” is wide-ranging, but can also usefully be subdivided in a number of ways.

The overall phrase “respect for human beings” can be used, with an emphasis on respect for the dignity and for the physical and psychic integrity of human beings, and this relationship with others can include colleagues, students, parents and so forth.

A particular extension of the principle of respect for others in relation to colleagues is the importance of collegiality in working.

The principle of respect for others can be developed in HE to include the concept of academic freedom. This can be extended to the elements associated with supporting the human rights of HE personnel, including researchers specifically.

The principle of respect for others can also be extended to recognise the general rights of the teacher and commitment to teachers by the community.

Of course, these expanded extensions of the principle of respect for others to HE staff and schoolteachers are only specific examples. The principle applies to all actors in education.

Trust

In an environment where all actors demonstrate respect for others, the principle of “trust” is also very important. This principle means that all actors in education can have a firm belief in the reliability of each other to be honest, truthful and act with integrity. Therefore, actors can trust others and expect to be trusted by others.

Accountability

When all actors in education show respect for others, and trust each other, the principle of “accountability” is much more securely based. This principle is the concept that individuals, agencies and organisations [public, private and civil society] are held responsible for executing their powers properly.

While there may be a particular stress on accountability in the running of HE institutions, the principle of accountability applies to all actors (at the level of individuals and institutions) in education.

Fairness

“Fairness” is a basic principle which all actors in education must observe in their approach to others. This principle involves treating others with impartiality, free from discrimination or dishonesty.

Equity, justice and social justice

The principles of “equity, justice and social justice” are wide-ranging, but can also usefully be subdivided in a number of ways.

The term “equity” can certainly be applied directly, for example to the equal treatment of all students in HE.

However, equity on its own perhaps stays relatively close in meaning to fairness, and can be more appropriately broadened to the term “justice”, or more particularly “social justice”.

For example, social justice can be defined to include the educational and social values of sustainability, equality and justice and recognising the rights and responsibilities of future as well as current generations and also to include fair, transparent, inclusive and sustainable policies and practices in relation to: age, disability, gender and gender identity, race, ethnicity, religion and belief and sexual orientation.

This definition of social justice can also be equated with education for social democracy and education for participative democracy/active citizenship.

This broader definition of social justice also provides the basis for a particular emphasis on non-discrimination, and the combating of racism, bias and discrimination.

It also provides the basis for a particular emphasis on access. This includes that all children should have access to education, and that there should be access to HE for as many academically qualified individuals as possible (with access to HE also involving a commitment to lifelong learning).

The broader definition of social justice also covers the concept of inclusion in very much the same way as it covers access.

Finally, the reference in the broader definition of social justice to “sustainability” can be linked to educational actors having responsibility for the stewardship of assets, resources and the environment.

As appropriate to their particular contexts, all actors in education should see the principle of equity, justice and social justice as applying to them.

Democratic and ethical governance and management of the education system and educational institutions

The principle of the “democratic and ethical governance and management of the education system and educational institutions” involves all actors in education recognising that the governance and management of the overall education system and individual educational institutions within it should be based on the democratic involvement of all relevant actors, and management by leaders who exercise their leadership in an ethical way.

Quality education

The principle of “quality education” involves all actors in education recognising their unconditional commitment to achieving educational provision which is of the highest quality possible.

This principle of quality education applies to all aspects of the education system.

Personal and systems improvement

The principle of “personal and systems improvement” involves all actors in education recognising the importance of making the maximum contribution possible to the continuous improvement of the education system.

For education professionals, this can be described as a specific professional commitment, both in terms of a commitment to personal improvement through professional development, and in terms of a commitment to the overall improvement of the system which personal development in turn contributes to.

Institutional autonomy/institutional independence

Within the context of democratic and ethical governance and management of the educational system and educational institutions, the principle of “institutional autonomy/institutional independence” is also very important. This involves recognising the need to give appropriate autonomy and independence to individual institutions within a national education system, so that excessive centralised political control of education is avoided.

The case for institutional autonomy/institutional independence tends to be made particularly for HE institutions, where it is specifically linked to the importance of academic freedom.

However, all actors in education should reflect on how far other education institutions, such as schools, require institutional autonomy/institutional independence if they are to function within an overall context which truly embeds democratic and ethical governance and management of the education system and educational institutions.

International co-operation

The principle of “international co-operation” involves all actors in education recognising the importance of positive international collaboration in education activities.

For example, this principle is central to the European Cultural Convention.

After detailing these ethical principles, the document then analyses the specific types of corruption in education which can be addressed by these principles (Chapter 6).

The document concludes that the next task will be to develop fuller statements of what the ethical principles imply for the ethical behaviour of all actors in education, and gives an initial indication of what the platform’s next document on this will cover (Chapter 7).

