Three snapshots of business ethics education at South African business schools: Sharp or still blurred?

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A B S T R A C T

This article reports on a study comparing three recordings (snapshots) of the provision of business ethics education in MBA curricula at South African business schools. The purpose of the study was to determine whether the occurrence of business ethics education in South African MBA programmes increased between 2003 and 2011 and between 2011 and 2016. A review of the relevant scholarly literature has shown that, although business education can be included in MBA curricula through its integration in the various modules of the programme, or through dedicated modules for business ethics, both these ways of inclusion can be regarded as necessary conditions for meaningful inclusion. This study focused only on the inclusion of dedicated business ethics modules. A directed content analysis was done of reports of the Council on Higher Education as well as MBA and MBL curricula documents of business schools. The comparison of the three snapshots revealed a decline between 2003 and 2011, as well as a further decline between 2011 and 2016 in the number of MBA programmes with a meaningful inclusion of business ethics in their curricula. The results of this study have confirmed that there is cause for concern about the quality of the MBA.

Key words: business ethics education, business schools, Master of Business Administration, behavioural moulding, business leaders, unethical behaviour

Introduction

Business schools all over the world annually admit talented students of diverse backgrounds into their Master of Business Administration (MBA) and Master of Business Leadership (MBL) programmes. Guided by meticulously crafted curricula, these schools use the programmes in an attempt to mould this heterogeneous

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group of students into high-performing business executives. It is generally expected from these high-performing business executives to be also known for their ethical leadership. In fact, within the South African context, the Unisa Graduate School of Business Leadership specifically aims to the train and develop "dynamic, ethical leaders for Africa and globally" (Unisa 2014: online).

To highlight the positive results of their education programmes, business schools generally take great pride in awarding their alumni who have risen to the highest echelons of business leadership and in publishing the names of such achievers. However, no evidence could be found of any business school owning up to having educated those business leaders who bring shame on the public and private business fraternity. In a highly critical article, entitled "Business schools have done too little to reform themselves in the light of the credit crunch", published in the influential publication *The Economist,* it is argued that business schools "cannot both claim that [their] mission is 'to educate leaders who make a difference in the world' … and then wash [their] hands of [their] alumni when the difference they make is malign" (*The Economist* 2009: online).

Six years before the publication of this article in *The Economist*, the South African Minister of Education's concerns about "the proliferation and the quality of MBAs" (Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2003: 6) resulted in the South African Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) being assigned to "undertake a comprehensive review of the state of the MBAs on offer in South Africa" and to "re-accredit all MBAs in both public and private institutions" (CHE 2003: 7). The very detailed report by the HEQC as published in 2004 by the CHE specifically emphasises the relevance and importance of business ethics in MBA[1] curricula by dedicating a whole chapter to this matter (CHE 2004).

The purpose of this article is to report on a research project comparing three snapshots of the provision made for business ethics education in MBA curricula at South African business schools, namely one taken by the HEQC review process in 2003 (CHE 2004), and the other one through this research project in 2011. The vexing question guiding the research project was whether the quality of the pictures (of provision for business ethics education in MBA curricula at South African business schools) taken respectively in 2011 and 2016 reflects an improvement compared to the one taken by the HEQC in 2003. In order to determine whether the meaningful inclusion of business ethics modules may have improved since the publication of the HEQC report in 2003, a research project was designed specifically to compare the three snapshots. This article consequently departs from a South African specific regulatory context to a generic theoretical perspective on the quality of the business ethics education provided by business schools. This South African

context and theoretical perspective jointly serve as the scenery for the research design and methods selected to describe and analyse the three snapshots, formulating the research findings and making valid concluding interpretations about the possible improvement of business ethics education.

The scene: A theoretical perspective on business ethics education as part of MBA programmes

The scene for comparing the snapshots of 2003, 2011 and 2016 of business ethics education provided by South African business schools that provide MBA programmes was not set by a theoretical discourse. It was set by the regulatory environment for business schools, namely the promulgation of the Higher Education Act (101 of 1997) and the report of the HEQC in 2003 (CHE 2003). The Higher Education Act determines, inter alia, the roles and responsibilities of two key regulatory institutions, namely the CHE and its permanent subcommittee, the HEQC (South Africa 1997: section 5). The 2003 report of the HEQC on the re-accreditation of the MBA in South Africa specifically refers to the then South African Minister of Education's concerns about "the proliferation and the quality of MBAs" (CHE 2003: 6) in South Africa.

The documented concern of the then Minister of Education about the MBA curricula resonates with similar concerns raised in other parts of the world. As early as 1987, Mulligan (1987: 595–596) observed in his article "The two cultures of business education" that a humanities-based component with specific reference to business ethics was lacking in the curricula of business schools. He argued that this imbalance between business science and humanities had as an end product of business education "a kind of manager-technician" (Mulligan 1987: 598) rather than a well-rounded business leader. Mulligan suggests that a dedicated ethics component should be regarded as a necessary condition for the curricula of MBA programmes. Following the above argument by Mulligan, the research project on which this article reports attempted to establish whether the ethics content of the curricula of MBA programmes offered in South Africa had increased since 2003.

A brief review of the scholarly literature on the ethics content of MBA programmes revealed several dominant themes. These themes, which are discussed below, include societal and personal values and beliefs as a context for business education, the occurrences of unethical behaviour by business leaders, the need for behavioural moulding by business schools and the suggested ethics content of business school curricula. The next section subsequently presents these themes as a theoretical perspective for the assessment of the three snapshots.

Societal and personal values and beliefs as a context for business education

Respect for and consideration of societal and personal values and beliefs have been shown to be a central theme in the literature on the education of future business leaders (Arce & Gentile 2015: 535; Galbraith & Webb 2010: 43). Research by Sigurjonsson, Vaiman and Arnardottir (2014: 1–13), done amongst business managers, revealed that these managers expected business schools to equip students with strong values, perspectives and ways of discerning the long-term interest of society. The managers "suggest that business schools should increase students' fundamental understanding of business ethics, strengthen their values, and allow for much stronger personal development" (Sigurjonsson et al. 2014: 9). Related to this emphasis on strengthening of values, the article by Arce and Gentile reports on a specific pedagogy designed for business ethics education to give "voice to values" (Arce & Gentile 2015: 535). Neesham and Gu (2015: 527, 528) refer in this regard to the "strengthening of moral judgment" resulting from an appeal to moral identity and an emphasis on personal engagement and increased responsiveness to ethical issues.

The personal values and beliefs of students and future managers are a fundamental consideration in the research and reflection about the inclusion of ethics content in business education. In this regard, the 2007 study by The Aspen Institute Centre for Business Education (The Aspen Institute 2008) is especially relevant. Their study of the attitudes of MBA students with respect to business and society revealed that about 80% of respondents indicated that it was "very important" that a "well-run company" operates "according to its values and a strong code of ethics" (The Aspen Institute 2008: 5). This rating is similar to their rating of the importance of the production of high-quality products and services (The Aspen Institute 2008: 6). The latter results are confirmed by Galbraith and Webb (2010: 43), who refer to the unique nature of the "millennial students" born between 1980 and 2001. Their research found that these individuals "agree that the accumulation of wealth is more valuable than a belief in a higher being" (Galbraith & Webb 2010: 43). They indicate that business schools face varied challenges ranging from teaching a unified set of ethical values and have to teach their students "there could be contrasting tensions and challenges in business that will test their value system" (Galbraith & Webb 2010: 43) in their day-to-day practice of ethics in business. These authors are convinced that students can be taught good ethical behaviour for business applications, and they regard it as the responsibility of academics in business schools to provide such guidance to their students (Galbraith & Webb 2010: 47–48). A fundamental question that has seemingly not been answered is whether the dominating value of wealth

accumulation and the inherent risk of unethical behaviour can be counter-balanced by ethics education. The next section deals with the reported concerns regarding the perceived lack of business ethics.

Unethical behaviour of business leaders

In an article reporting on a review of the attitudes and ethical concerns of future business leaders over a period of 30 years, Drover, Franczak and Beltramini (2011: 436) observe that the "overall level of ethical concern has actually increased to a 30-year high". This high level of concern relates to unethical behaviour such as corrupt organisational practices and trends of immoral business behaviour (Drover et al. 2011: 433). Unethical behaviour by business leaders is not a recent phenomenon. Clement (2006: 314) reports on the classic example from US history of John D Rockefeller, then owner of the Standard Oil Company of Ohio, who in 1870 secretly agreed with railroads to ship his oil with them, on condition that they provided rebates on their prices. This agreement drove many of Rockefeller's competitors out of business (Clement 2006: 314).

The trend of unethical business behaviour has increased despite the presence of codes of conduct and value statements (Clement 2006: 322). Research by Clement (2006: 322) revealed that "40 firms (40% of the firms in the Fortune 100 as of 1999) have engaged in behaviours that can be considered unethical". Verschoor (2002: 24), in his reflection on whether Enron's downfall (in 2001) could be attributed to its ethical missteps, argues that, despite the presence of superior internal controls as well as "most of the elements of an effective ethics management system", the collapse of the company is to be blamed on "the ethical climate in the company, which allowed a series of ethical missteps to occur". With regard to the ethical climate evident from unethical behaviour and scandals associated with companies such as Enron, Tyco and WorldCom, Cavico and Mujtaba (2009: 2) report that some critics blame business schools for focusing too much on the achievement of "the bottom-line at all cost".

Research by Luiz and Stewart (2014: 395) on corruption within the context of South African multinational enterprises (MNEs) and institutions in Africa revealed "a very strong concern by MNEs of the dangers of corruption within African countries". Their research furthermore revealed "a dynamic framework of institutions, MNEs and corruption in which complex web of associations result in MNEs being both affected by and impacting upon the institutional environment and in which corruption is both a by-product and a cause of this institutional milieu" (Luiz & Stewart 2014: 396).

The literature has revealed a historical and universal presence of unethical business practices. This has resulted in a sincere concern about both the ethical climate in the business sector and this sector's ability to prepare future business leaders adequately to make ethical bottom-line decisions.

Behavioural moulding through ethics content in business school curricula

The third theme identified in the literature review is a real expectation amongst practitioners as well as scholars that business schools should mould the ethical behaviour of future business leaders. Considering that the present article reports on a South African case study, it is appropriate to start the exploration of this theme in the year of the promulgation of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, which set the scene for this research project, with reference to an article by Rossouw (1997: 1539–1547) on the state of business ethics as an academic discipline. Rossouw's survey of graduate business schools in South Africa indicates that business ethics was at that stage a compulsory module at only one institution, and an elective at two other institutions (Rossouw 1997: 1542). Although Rossouw agrees that the integration of business ethics in various modules where it is appropriate "should be regarded as the ideal and first prize", he holds the view that the "value of an independent course on business ethics in conjunction with the process of integration can hardly be overestimated" (Rossouw 1997: 1546). Rossouw thus raises two important issues, namely regarding the need for the inclusion of business ethics in the curricula of business schools and the question whether this inclusion should occur as a separate offering or as an integral part of the traditional courses or modules.

The review of the literature has shown the evolving of similar sub-themes as identified by Rossouw (1997). There seems to be fair agreement amongst scholars about the need for including business ethics as part of the curricula of business schools. Some authors, such as Cavico and Mujtaba (2009: 2), tend to blame the unethical behaviour and scandals found in the business world on the overemphasis of business schools on bottom-line issues at all costs rather than emphasising the long-term success of their graduates. Freeman, Stewart and Moriarty (2009: 39) take the matter further by stating that the standard business school curriculum does not encourage students to engage in moral reflection, as it (i.e. the curriculum) "is full of analytic techniques, methods of financial engineering, and an ideology that is deeply hostile to business ethics". Considering the above analysis of the shortfalls of standard business school curricula, the proposal by Wines (2008: 487) for a "solid, comprehensive course in business ethics" is worth considering. Wines includes in his understanding of the comprehensiveness of such a course aspects such as moral

philosophy, ethical dilemmas, corporate social responsibility as well as "other areas necessary to make sense of the goings-on in the business world" (Wines 2008: 487). This proposal is supported by the findings of a subsequent study conducted by Lau (2010: 581), which suggest that ethics education not only has significant value in improving the overall ethical orientation of students, but it also empowers students to take a "higher ethical stance" (Lau 2010: 581)on a range of ethical issues. These results can be regarded as support for the expectation that the inclusion of business ethics offerings in curricula at business schools will contribute to behavioural moulding or conditioning, preparing future business leaders to deal with complex moral choices and to take ethical decisions when under fire in the work situation (Wines 2008: 492).

Amidst the evidently fair agreement amongst scholars on the need for the inclusion of offerings on business ethics in the curricula of business schools, two distinct views on the most meaningful way of inclusion similar to that of Rossouw (1997: 1546) have emerged, namely a "stand-alone" (Henle 2006: 354) course or module on ethics, or the integration of the ethical implications of decisions regarding, for example, accounting, marketing, management and finance. Roderick, a former president and chief executive officer of Royal & Sun Alliance USA, argues that a meaningful way of inclusion is to follow both modes simultaneously (Henle 2006: 354). This approach of inclusion implies a partnership between the business community and the business schools that will allow feedback from organisations on the competencies required from ethical business executives (Henle 2006: 354). Considering this implied revolving door between the business sector and business schools, the investigation by Waples, Antes, Murphy, Connelly and Mumford (2009: 148) is significant as it indicates that the outcome of business ethics offerings on the ethical awareness, behaviour and perceptions of students depends to a large extent on the instructional strategies followed to support the content. It is thus fair to expect instructional strategies to provide for this constant interaction with practice.

The discourse on the integration of business ethics versus offering it as a separate course or module has been kept alive by various authors. Brown, Sauttner, Littvay, Sauttner and Bearnes (2010: 203–208) argue in favour of the integrated offering of business ethics as they believe that students do not acquire sufficient ethical decision-making skills by being exposed to one course or subject. Their argument is substantiated by their very specific view of what business schools tend to do and what they should do, namely the following (Brown et al. 2010: 204):

> The very nature of a business school is to equip individuals with an academic and social skill set that helps them to succeed in a competitive business world. What may be left out of this equation is the proverbial moral line in the sand that helps students discern the ethical from the merely profitable.

Despite the lack of agreement amongst scholars whether an integrated or a separate approach to the teaching of business ethics will be the best way of crossing that moral line in the sand, the advocates for the pro-separate approach (Felton & Sims 2005: 378; Henle 2006: 351–352; Rossouw 1997: 1546; Wines 2008: 487) do not argue against the integration of business ethics knowledge and competence in the other courses of MBA curricula. They strongly argue for at least a separate standard course in business ethics as part of an MBA programme in order to cross the moral line by preparing future graduates, as eloquently formulated by Felton and Sims (2005: 388), to –

- understand the kinds of moral issues they are likely to confront in their chosen functional or professional areas,
- [i]ntroduce them to the moral ideas of their functional areas …, and
- [a]ssist them in understanding the relationship between their functional work and that of the broader values and needs of the society.

A theoretical perspective on ethics in business education

From the literature review, five theoretical assumptions have been deduced to serve collectively as a point of departure for this study:

Theoretical assumption 1:	Highly efficient companies are driven by sound values and a strong code of ethics (The Aspen Institute 2008: 6).
Theoretical assumption 2:	There is a general concern about an evidently growing culture of corruption and unethical behaviour in the business world (Clement 2006: 314; Drover et al. 2011: 431–437; Luiz & Stewart 2014: 383–398).
Theoretical assumption 3:	Students can be taught good ethical behaviour (Galbraith & Webb 2010: 43).
Theoretical assumption 4:	Business schools are expected to instil and strengthen (teach) moral judgement, values, perspectives and ways of perceiving the long-term interest of society (Arce & Gentile 2015: 535; Galbraith & Webb 2010: 47–48; Neesham & Gu 2015: 537–534; Sigurjonsson et al. 2014: 3).
Theoretical assumption 5:	Both the integration of business ethics principles in the various modules of an MBA degree and a separate, solid, independent, comprehensive module in business ethics are necessary conditions for

MBA curricula to contribute meaningfully to the behavioural moulding of future business leaders (Henle 2006: 354; Lau 2010: 581; Waples et al. 2009: 354; Wines 2008: 492).

The research project on which this article reports thus departed from the assumption that sound corporate values are necessary conditions for highly efficient companies (theoretical assumption 1). Furthermore, the present researchers took cognisance of the general concern about an evidently growing culture of corruption and unethical behaviour in the business world (theoretical assumption 2) as this represents a decline in what is assumed a necessary condition for highly efficient companies (theoretical assumption 1). The present researchers also assumed that good ethical behaviour can be taught (theoretical assumption 3) and that it is reasonable to expect business schools to do this teaching through the MBA programme (theoretical assumption 4). Irrespective of the diverse views of the most appropriate way of accommodating the teaching of business ethics in the curricula of the various MBA programmes offered in South Africa, the present researchers assumed that ethics integration and a dedicated compulsory module are both necessary conditions for MBA curricula to mould the orientations and behaviour of future business leaders (theoretical assumption 5). Consequently, this research project set out to determine whether the meaningful inclusion of business ethics in South African MBA programmes increased between 2003 and 2011, and between 2011 and 2016. The methodological considerations for this article are elaborated on in the next section.

Methodological considerations

Considering that the research purpose as stated in the previous section was to determine whether the occurrence of business ethics education in South African MBA programmes increased between 2003 and 2011, and between 2011 and 2016, the unit of analysis for this comparative study was the MBA programmes as offered by the various South African institutions of higher education. The units of observation were documents, consisting of several CHE and HEQC reports (especially for the first snapshot), and curricula documentation of the various providers of MBA programmes in South Africa. The points of focus were those parts providing information on the provision of business ethics education. Considering that the main sources of information for this project were documents, the researchers decided to conduct a directed content analysis of these documents.

A directed content analysis was especially appropriate as a method for achieving the purpose of this research project as such analysis is guided by a structured process by identifying key concepts or variables in the texts (Hsieh & Shannon 2005: 1281). While the main strength of a directed content analysis is probably its ability to support and extend existing theory, we have applied this structured method to compare three distinct sets of documentation in a meaningful way (Hsieh & Shannon 2005: 1282, 1283). The variables for this project were the indicators of occurrences of business ethics education in the various MBA programmes. Two categories of documents were selected: for the first snapshot, the report on the re-accreditation of MBAs by the HEQC (South Africa 2003) as well as the very detailed report on the state of the provision of the MBA in South Africa published by the CHE (2004), and for the second and third snapshots, the MBA curricula of the 18 South African business schools.

The indicators for measuring the occurrences of business ethics were deduced from the above two reports (CHE 2003; 2004). The 2003 report identified thirteen criterion statements in order to determine whether the MBA programmes met the minimum standards of the HEQC (CHE 2003: 7). One of these criterion statements, namely criterion 9, is entitled Learning Programme (CHE 2003: 9–10). Twelve minimum standards were formulated for this criterion statement. One of them, namely standard viii, refers to the core content of the programme with a requirement that it should include ethical issues as an environmental force affecting organisations (CHE 2003: 39). The inclusion of the effect of ethical issues on organisations as "underpinning knowledge" (CHE 2003: 39) has thus been set as a minimum standard for the core content of an MBA qualification.

The subsequent report published in 2004 (CHE 2004) shows that ethics as a social responsibility standard was measured according to its mode of inclusion in the curriculum, namely as –

- an obligatory course or module;
- a half-course or part of another course;
- an elective;
- a specialisation subject; or as
- a research or case study (CHE 2004:121).

Considering that the present research project was specifically concerned with the occurrence of business ethics education components in MBA programmes, the content analysis set out to identify the occurrence of only three of the above five modes of offerings –

- the number of programmes containing a dedicated compulsory business ethics module or course;
- the number of programmes containing a compulsory module or course with at least a business ethics component; and
- the number of programmes that at least contained business education as an elective module or course.

For the first snapshot, a content analysis was done of "The state of the provision of the MBA in South Africa" (CHE 2004), while the second snapshot was the result of a content analysis of the curriculum documents of the MBA programmes offered by 18 South African public and private business schools. These documents were in the public domain and available on the websites of the respective business schools. Table 1 provides a summary of the methodological considerations as discussed above. The results of the two phases of this quantitative content analysis are discussed in the next section.

Table 1: Methodological considerations

Unit of analysis	MBA programmes offered by the various South African institutions of higher education
Units of observation	Documents: • the 2004 report issued by the CHE • curricula documentation of the various providers of MBA programmes in South Africa
Points of focus	Characteristics of documents: indicators of provision for business ethics education
Research method	Directed content analysis
Categories of recording units (indicators of provision for business ethics education)	• Programmes containing a dedicated compulsory business ethics module or course • Programmes containing a compulsory module or course with at least a business ethics component • Programmes containing at least business education as an elective module or course

Snapshot 1: The business ethics content of MBA curricula in 2003

Snapshot 1 of the unit of analysis (MBA programmes offered by the various South African business schools) was taken in 2003 and published in 2004 (CHE 2004). This snapshot can only be observed as part of one unit of observation, namely the report by the HEQC entitled "Higher education monitor: The state of the provision

of the MBA in South Africa" (CHE 2004). The snapshot was commissioned by the Minister of Education (CHE 2003: 7) and was the result of a comprehensive review of the state of MBAs on offer in South Africa and a re-accreditation of all MBAs in public and private institutions (CHE 2003: 7). Higher education institutions were required to submit their applications for accreditation in the form of a narrative self-study document, including supporting documents (CHE 2003). The review of the submissions of 37 programmes resulted in the full accreditation of 7 programmes, the conditional accreditation of 15 programmes and the de-accreditation of a further 15 programmes (CHE 2004: vii). This first snapshot was thus not taken by the researchers who undertook the research project, and should be regarded as secondary data not originally produced for the purpose of this research project (Wessels & Visagie 2015: 11).

The point of focus of the present research project was a specific part of this landscape photograph, namely the indicators of provision for business ethics education. The results of a meticulous inspection of this snapshot were disappointing, specifically as the 'low resolution' (vagueness in the report) resulted in a lack of detailed information. With regard to indicators of provision for business education, the report only provides information on a selection of 16 MBA programmes (CHE 2004: 121). It does not provide any information on how these programmes were sampled. For the purpose of analysing this snapshot, only that part of the picture that relates to provision for business ethics education was 'cropped' (selected) and analysed for the indicators as listed in Table 1.

The directed content analysis of the report revealed the following (CHE 2004: 121):

- 4 (31.25%) of the 16 programmes did not include any module or course with an identifiable business ethics content;
- 3 (18.75%) of the 16 programmes contained a dedicated compulsory business ethics module or course; while
- 4 (25%) of the 16 contained a compulsory module or course with at least a business ethics component; and
- the remaining 4 (25%) programmes contained business education as an elective module or course.

From the above, it can be deduced that about 44% of the MBA programmes reported on in the 2004 report included modules or courses attending to ethical issues in the core content of their curricula in 2003.

Snapshots 2 and 3: The business ethics content in MBA curricula in 2011 and 2016

While the first snapshot was not taken by the authors of this article, the second and third snapshots of the MBA programmes as offered by the various South African institutions of higher education were taken by the present authors in 2011 and 2016 respectively. The units of observation (the 21 curriculum documents of the 18 business schools providing MBA programmes in South Africa in 2011 and the 18 curriculum documents of the 18 business schools providing MBA programmes in South Africa in 2016) were observed through a directed content analysis searching for indicators of provision for business ethics education.

This content analysis revealed the following. In 2011, 9 (42.9%) MBA programmes did not include any module or course, either compulsory or as an elective, with an identifiable business ethics content. This percentage deteriorated to 72.2% in 2016. In 2011, 8 (38%) MBA programmes included a compulsory business ethics module or course, of which only one (6.25%) was of a dedicated, stand-alone nature. This category of compulsory business ethics module or course decreased to only 22.2% of the total in 2016, with only 5.6% being a dedicated, stand-alone module. In the bulk of these modules, business ethics was combined with themes such as law, governance, sustainability, corporate citizenship, normative management, balancing economic imperatives with social value, and leadership. The MBA programmes with business education as an elective module or course, decreased from 4 (19%) in 2011 to one (5.6%) in 2016.

From the above, it can be deduced that only 38.2% of the 21 MBA programmes surveyed for the purpose of this project in 2011 included modules or courses specifically attending to ethical issues in the core content of their curricula. This percentage decreased to only 22.2% of the 18 MBA programmes in 2016.

A comparative analysis of the three snapshots

Considering that the purpose of this research project was to determine whether the occurrence of business ethics education in South African MBA programmes increased between 2003 and 2011, as well as between 2011 and 2016, the three snapshots described in the previous sections are compared in this section. A comparison according to the indicators provided in Table 1 is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Comparison of the business ethics content in MBA curricula in 2003, 2011 and 2016

	Number of MBA curricula evaluated	Number of MBA programmes without any compulsory or elective module in business ethics	Number of MBA programmes with a compulsory module containing a business ethics component	Number of MBA programmes with a compulsory dedicated business ethics module	Number of MBA programmes with a business ethics module as an elective
2003 snapshot	16	5 (31.25%)	4 (25%)	3 (18.75%)	4 (25%)
2011 snapshot	21	9 (42.9%)	7 (31.75%)	1 (6.25)	4 (19%)
2016 snapshot	182	13 (72.2%)	3 (16.6%)	1 (5.6%)	1 (5.6%)

It is evident from the comparison presented in Table 2 that the percentage of MBA programmes in South Africa with a compulsory business ethics component, whether as a stand-alone module or as part of another module, gradually declined from 43.75% in 2003 to 38% in 2011 and 22.2% in 2016. Furthermore, the percentage of programmes with business ethics as an elective also declined from 25% in 2003, to 19% in 2011 and 5.6% in 2016.

The comparison (Table 2) does not reveal whether business ethics was integrated in the other modules of the respective programmes. However, if one assumes that a meaningful way of inclusion is to follow both modes simultaneously (Roderick as interviewed by Henle 2006: 354), the decline in the percentage of dedicated business ethics modules constitutes a worrisome decay of instances of meaningful inclusion of business ethics in MBA curricula in the period between 2003 and 2016. Following the line of argument presented in the literature reviewed for this study, this decay in instances of meaningful inclusion of business ethics in the curricula of South African business schools implies a general decline in the opportunity for South African MBA students to be fostered in moral reflection (Freeman et al. 2009: 39), to be empowered for taking a high ethical stance (Lau 2010: 581), to be guided to a growing understanding of the moral issues within the business environment (Felton & Sims 2005: 388) and to be provided with the competence needed for solving ethical dilemmas in business life (Furlonger 2012).

Conclusion

By comparing the snapshots of MBA curricula of South African business schools, this article provides evidence of a decline from 44% in 2003 to 22.2% in 2016 of the total number of South African MBA curricula with a compulsory module fully or substantially dedicated to business ethics. While a limitation of this study

is possibly the exclusion of an analysis of the integration of business ethics in the other compulsory modules of the curricula under review, our literature review has provided sufficient support for theoretical assumption 5, namely that both the integration of business ethics in other modules and a dedicated business ethics module are necessary conditions for meaningful inclusion of business ethics in MBA programmes. The decline in the percentage of MBA curricula which include a compulsory module in business ethics thus suggests a decline in the percentage of South African MBA programmes with a meaningful inclusion of business ethics.

The decline in the percentage of South African MBA programmes with a meaningful inclusion of business ethics in their curricula, implies a decline in the percentage of business schools with the potential to meet the expectation of instilling and strengthening moral judgement, values, perspectives and ways of perceiving the long-term interest of society in their students (see theoretical assumption 4). This constitutes lost opportunities for teaching MBA students good ethical behaviour (see theoretical assumption 3).

This article thus provides sufficient grounds for a general concern about the ability of MBA curricula to instil sound values and a strong sense of ethics in future business leaders (theoretical assumption 1). This constitutes an inability of these programmes to contribute to arresting or slowing down the growing culture of corruption and unethical behaviour in the business world (see theoretical assumption 2).

Through the development of the five theoretical assumptions, this article contributes to the in-depth understanding of the potential of business ethics education to provide the business sector with leaders equipped with sound values and a strong sense of ethics. Based on the assumption supported by Galbraith and Webb (2010: 43) that students can be taught good ethics behaviour, this article argues that it can be rightfully expected of business schools to instil and strengthen moral judgement and sound values in MBA students. However, this article convincingly argues that this can only happen if business schools do not only integrate these principles in the various modules of an MBA programme, but also instil these principles through a separate, solid, stand-alone module as part of the core curriculum.

Our study focused on only one of the two necessary conditions for meaningful ethics inclusion, namely the presence of a separate, dedicated business ethics module in the core curriculum of an MBA programme. Further research is needed to focus more closely on the content of the core modules to understand how business ethics can be optimally integrated in other modules in the curriculum, if at all.

Notes

1. The abbreviation MBA in this text includes the MBL (Master of Business Leadership) qualification.
2. The decrease in the number of MBA programmes since 2011 is due to the fact that one business school no longer offers an Entrepreneurship MBA programme and the MBA (NQF 8) programmes offered at two other business schools are no longer offered in 2016.

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