

Miriam MARTINKOVIČOVÁ, Dana BENČIKOVÁ  
Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia  
e-mail: Miriam.Martinkovicova@umb.sk, Dana.Bencikova@umb.sk

## THE ETHICAL COMPETENCE OF GRADUATES AS A PART OF THEIR PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE

**Abstract.** The paper deals with professional competences, and within their structure, it specifically engages in those which shape the level of ethical competence of future university graduates. The authors point out the growing trend in job market requirements related to this type of qualities of university-educated individuals. The main purpose of paper is to analyze the students' perception of the importance of ethical erudition, ability to perceive morally, as well as make moral assumptions and adequate ethical decisions. It presents the results of a questionnaire research, the aim of which was to identify the readiness of students to attend and complete a university course of applied ethics, and their expectations of such type of education.

**Keywords:** tertiary education, professional competencies, ethical erudition, moral judgment, ethical sensitivity

## KOMPETENCJE ETYCZNE ABSOLWENTÓW JAKO CZĘŚĆ ICH KWALIFIKACJI ZAWODOWYCH

**Streszczenie.** Niniejszy artykuł dotyczy kompetencji zawodowych, szczególnie tych, które kształtują poziom etyczny przyszłych absolwentów. Zwrócono uwagę na rosnącą tendencję wymagań rynku pracy odnoszących się do absolwentów uczelni. Zbadano zdolność postrzegania sensu i znaczenia etycznego erudycji, rozumowania moralnego i etycznego podejmowania decyzji przez samych studentów. Przedstawiono wyniki badania ankietowego, którego celem było określenie wstępnej gotowości uczniów do wzięcia udziału i ukończenia uniwersyteckiego kursu etyki stosowanej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wyższe wykształcenie, kwalifikacje zawodowe, etyczna erudycja, rozumowanie moralne, etyczna wrażliwość

## Introduction

The requirements related to preparedness of university graduates for the needs of the dynamically developing job market are gradually increasing. They vary in relation to the field of a graduate's perspective career, social sector in which the graduate seeks for a job, or the fact that the sought job is either a specialized position or a more generally competence-defined one. Another differentiating factor may be the working position in a national company (in the home country) or in an international one (located abroad). The current imperative of a graduate's applicability and employability defines what a university graduate should know, i.e. what should be learned and understood, and what should be mastered at a theoretical level. At the same time, more specific requirements are clearly defined as to what graduates should be able to do, manage, and organize, as well as in relation to the requirements for their behavior and conduct within the frame of the current norms of corporate culture. To sum up, the job market itself determines the required level of not only cognitive but also social intelligence of university graduates for the needs of practice (Kalousková, Vojtěch, 2008; Kleštincová, 2011; Lesáková, Dzimko, Farkašová, 2012; Kozáková, 2017; Martinkovičová, Benčíková, 2016).

We believe that the more complex and versatile the graduate's – future employee's – preparedness for practice is, the more flexible he/she will be in responding to the employer's requirements. This does not only concern the standard the extent of knowledge acquired during university studies and possessed by a graduate, but it also relates to all other components of professionalism, i.e. the graduate's skills, abilities, and the repertoire of the acquired values. On the basis of these, a graduate acts and forms his own views, which enable him to create a meaningful network of social contacts and interpersonal work relations. High quality university education/preparation should therefore equally cultivate and develop both the level of cognitive intelligence and social (interpersonal) intelligence of an individual, with moral intelligence falling under this concept.

It is the ethical competences which intertwine within all components of an individual's professionalism, and with their standards influence specific behaviors of an employee in practice, when in contact with supervisors, colleagues, business partners, or public and state institutions (Kuzior, 2014). The attention placed on their creation and development, however, is not sufficient in the current conditions of university preparation, or it is marginal, excluding those faculties and departments the programs of which are specifically focused on preparing professionals in the field of ethics for the society. It appears that profiling of the university graduates automatically assumes a certain required standard of moral competences along with obtaining the university degree, while these should qualify the graduate in the job market not only as an educated and knowledgeable individual, but also as a reliable, cultivated, respectable, and loyal employee. Such automatic positive correlation of professional

competence and morality does not exist in practice. Signing a contract and committing to following the company's code of ethics or other corporate ethical institutes does not mean that an organization is automatically hiring an honest, responsible, reliable, caring, and polite individual. This is especially seen in those cases when such values as dignity, honesty, integrity, or being pro-social, fair or polite are simply some merely declared limits of interpersonal relations, and do not constitute one's value orientation.

To create adequate space for cultivating the personality and moral maturity of future graduates in the process of university preparation means to enable them to learn, understand, and acquire the needed moral values, develop a whole palette of individual moral qualities, and thus create a solid foundation to developing ethical competences in any professional field. Simply said, requiring a young manager to be considerate, just, and perceptive towards his subordinates only makes sense if he has already acquired the adequate values, which enable him to act this way. The primary aim of the paper is to identify the basic level of ethical (non-)erudition of students. Firstly, it is essential to find out what students know about ethics, and what importance, if any, they assign to ethical issues and moral problems. Students have a tendency to perceive their university studies from a rather technocratic and instrumental point of view. They reduce learning to acquiring facts and information without their contextual linking. They frequently learn to discover, create and control organizational processes without realizing that it is people: colleagues, supervisors, or other stakeholders, who will be an inevitable part of those processes: people, not as human capital or workforce, but as individuals, personalities with their own needs, interests, views, or ambitions. Cooperation and a high quality performance are, that is to say, fundamentally based on relations and relationships in every working environment. Each organization may be considered 'healthy' and in good condition only as much as interpersonal relations among its members.

## **1. The objective and the research methodology**

Broadly speaking, forming and developing a mature personality of an individual is influenced by the process of socialization. University studies may, in this respect, be considered to be the final institution which is to contribute to the process and its significance. At this level of education, it is inevitable to take account of the fact that the participants are adult people who, from the moral development point of view of an individual, are at a certain level of maturity (Kohlberg, 1976; Kohlberg, 1980). The way how to connect and harmonize the professional preparation with the cultivation of ethical-value views and attitudes, is therefore much more complex and demanding. This is intensified by the fact that in most cases, the potential for supporting and developing this type of competences is rather limited within the educational process. At some schools, courses that fall under the field of applied

ethics are included in the study plans, e.g.: Corporate Ethics, Managerial Ethics, Corporate Social Responsibility, Public Sector Ethics, Financial Ethics, or Ethics of Taxes. Pedagogical and research practice shows that in this respect, it is advisable to avoid “moralizing” or focusing merely on formal and informational character of teaching ethics-related knowledge on the teacher’s side (Hrehová, 2011, p. 282; Yang, 2005; Clarkeburn, 2003, p. 443-457).

The foundation for an effective usage of the existing educational environment to develop ethical competence as a part of professional competences of university students, may be seen in the awareness of their ethical erudition standards. Simply said, in order to secure an adequate effectiveness of the educational methods and activities, it is essential to understand what ethical knowledge students possess, how they form and perceive their own value system, what influences their moral judgments, and if they are capable of critical self-reflection in relation to moral evaluation and decision making.

In this paper, the authors present partial results of a research conducted within the course of Professional Ethics at the Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, at the beginning of the summer semester of the 2016/2017 academic year. The main objective of the questionnaire survey was to identify how well students are prepared to take and complete the university course of applied ethics, as well as to find out what expectations they have of this course. There were 64 respondents of our survey – students of four study programs which are provided at the Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University, i.e. Corporate Economics and Management, Territorial Management, Public Economics and Management, and Finance, Banking and Investment. Applied ethics (entitled Professional Ethics) is an elective course in all four study programs, being planned for the bachelor study. This means that our respondents were students of the first, second, and third years of university studies. The questionnaire return rate was 100%, since the survey was performed personally by the teacher as an introductory monitor within the given course.

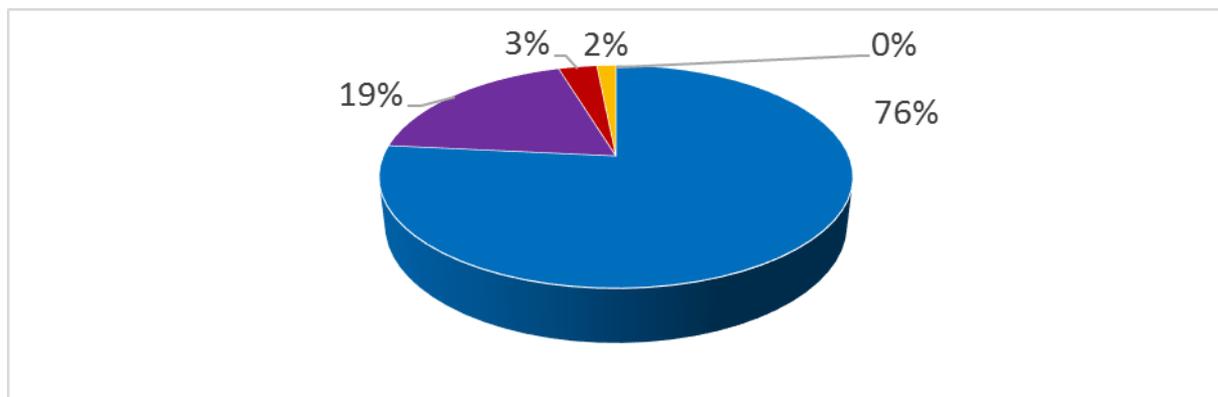
## **2. Results and discussion**

In this section, we provide the results of the conducted survey, which relate to the evaluation of the students’ own knowledge of ethics, as well as the satisfaction with its level. Questions identified the students’ opinions about ethics and its different areas of study, as well as understanding its importance. As we were interested in the level of individual moral perceptiveness of respondents, we also asked about the student’s views of the most current problems of the Slovak society from the point of view of ethics. The last selected and evaluated question for the purposes of this paper, focused on perception of the importance of professional ethics in practice. It is the responses to this particular question which open up a broad methodical and educational space for us, having revealed understanding for the

importance of ethical competences of an individual in a working environment, which requires possessing them as a part of professional competence of university graduates.

When evaluating the current level of awareness and knowledge about ethics, the respondents were asked to indicate their view on the Likert scale from 1 – excellent knowledge, to 5 – very low knowledge.

As seen in Fig. 1, most respondents (61) assess their awareness and knowledge of ethics as average or positive. As many as 76.6% of students assume their knowledge of ethics being average, while 18.8% consider it very good. It is very satisfactory that the option ‘very low level of knowledge’ was not chosen by any respondent.



| responses           | number | percentage |
|---------------------|--------|------------|
| 3 – average level   | 49     | 76.6%      |
| 2 – very good level | 12     | 18.8%      |
| 4 – low level       | 2      | 3.1%       |
| 1 – excellent level | 1      | 1.6%       |
| 5 – very low level  | 0      | 0%         |

Fig. 1. Evaluation of the current level of knowledge about ethics  
Source: author's research

To achieve the objective of the research, an important question related to evaluating satisfaction with the current knowledge of ethics was asked. As indicated in Fig. 2, only one student is satisfied with the current knowledge of this issue and has decided to engage in the subject within the Professional Ethics course only to obtain credits for participation. On the other hand, the majority of respondents consider the need to learn and acquire more knowledge related to ethics to be important, irrelevant of the individual's education (59.4%), and appreciate the opportunity to learn more valuable information about the subject (total 39.1%).

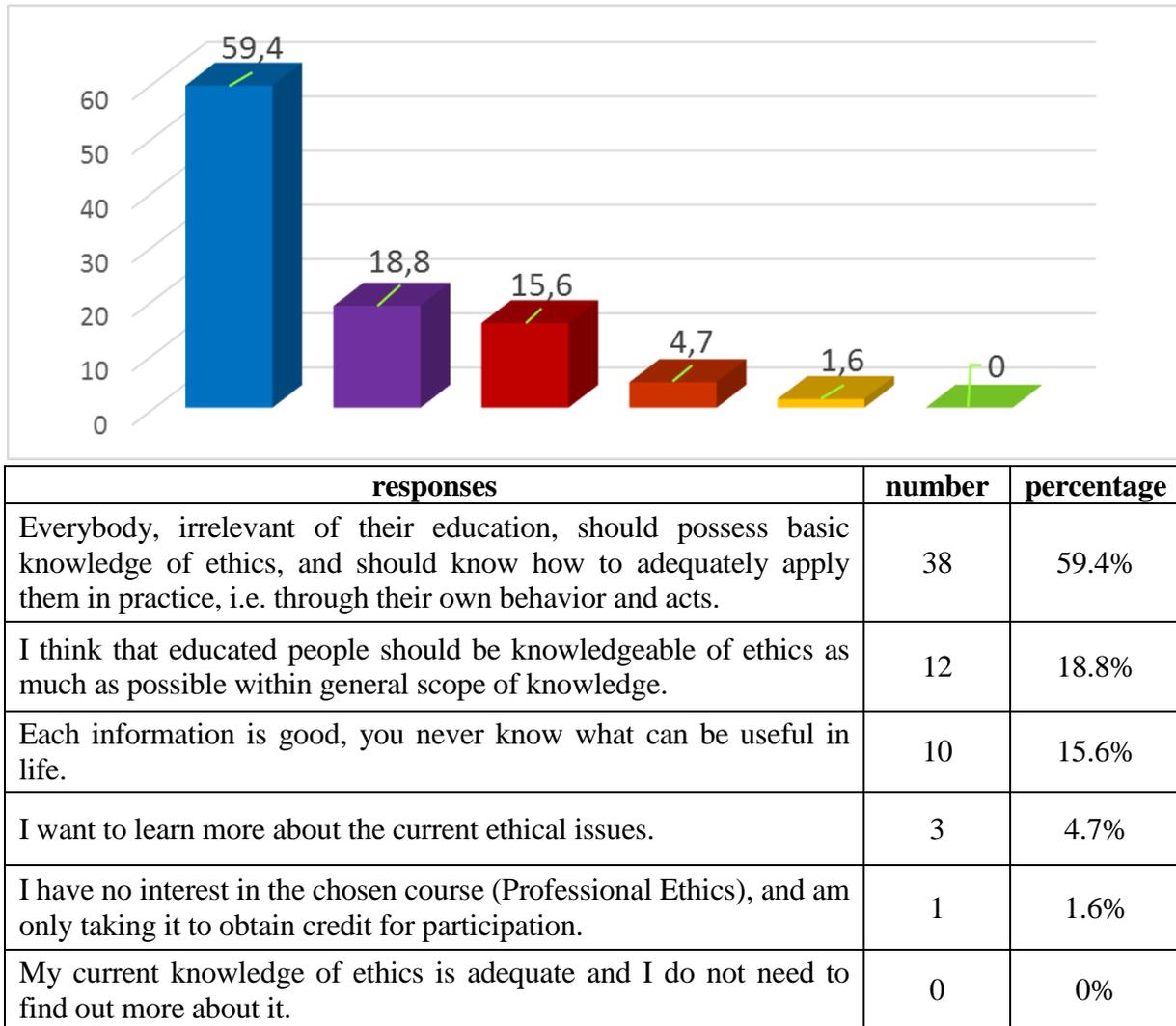


Fig. 2. Satisfaction with the current level of knowledge of ethics  
Source: author's research

We are living our lives at different levels and within different spheres. For everyone, the primary sphere is the private – intimate one, within which we socialize with the immediate family and closest friends. We create relations based on important family and friendship values of coexistence and accepting each other. The next sphere we become a part of within our lives is the workplace, a formal environment, which all of us enter with certain – already existing value orientation, and the acquired ways of behavior. Public sphere complements the previous two. What they all have in common is the presence of people and their actions, which is characterized by an observable level of social, and moral/ethical, intelligence. Realizing the fact that ethics penetrates into all spheres of a person's life by as many as 90.6% of our respondents is a very satisfactory finding (Fig. 3).

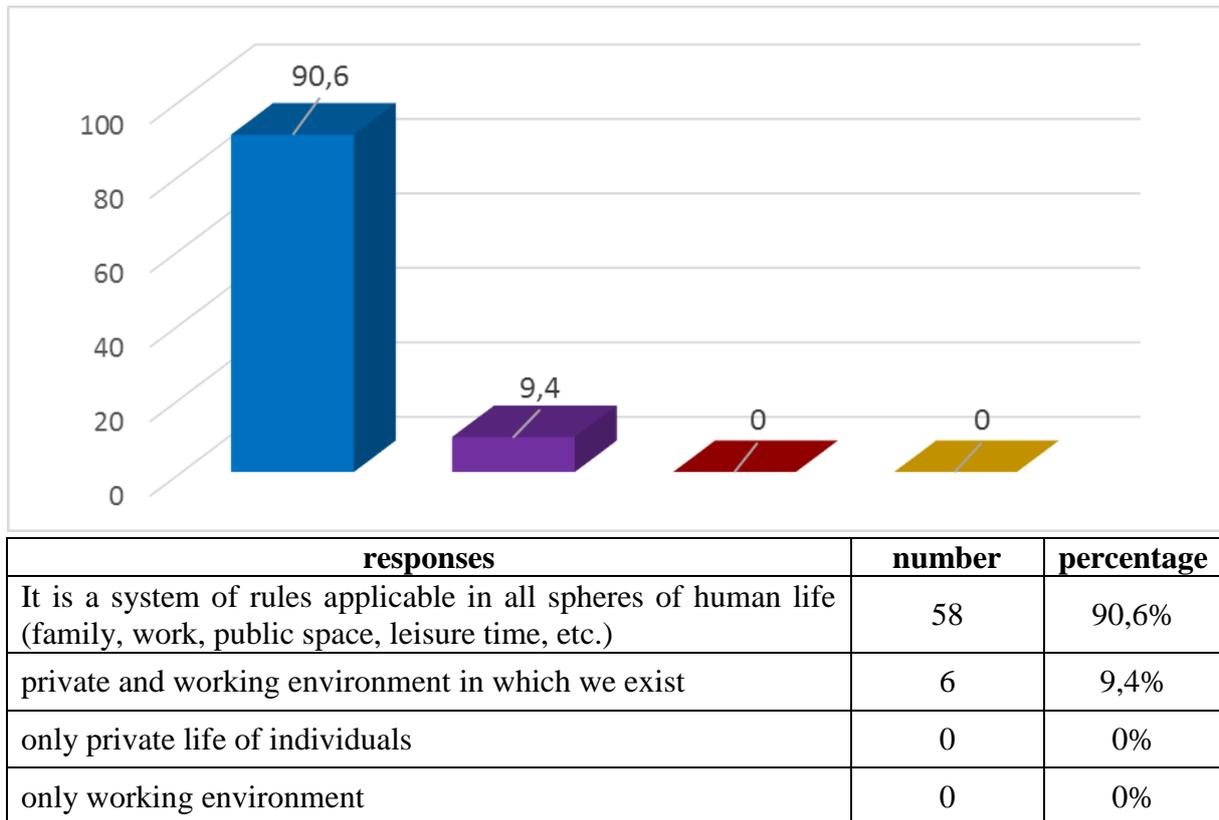
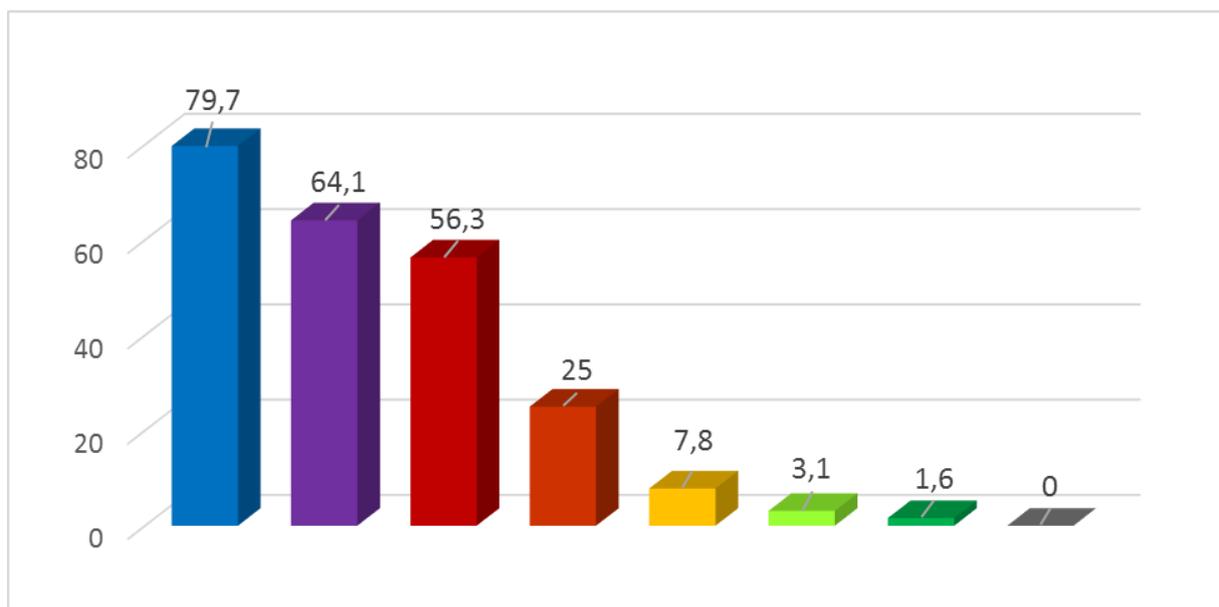


Fig. 3. Spheres into which ethics penetrates

Source: author's research

The following question monitored how students understand the term ethics, what they assume ethics concerns, and what it reflects, since in the previous question, majority of them assumed that ethics penetrates into all spheres of human life. Fig. 4 presents the variability of the responses.

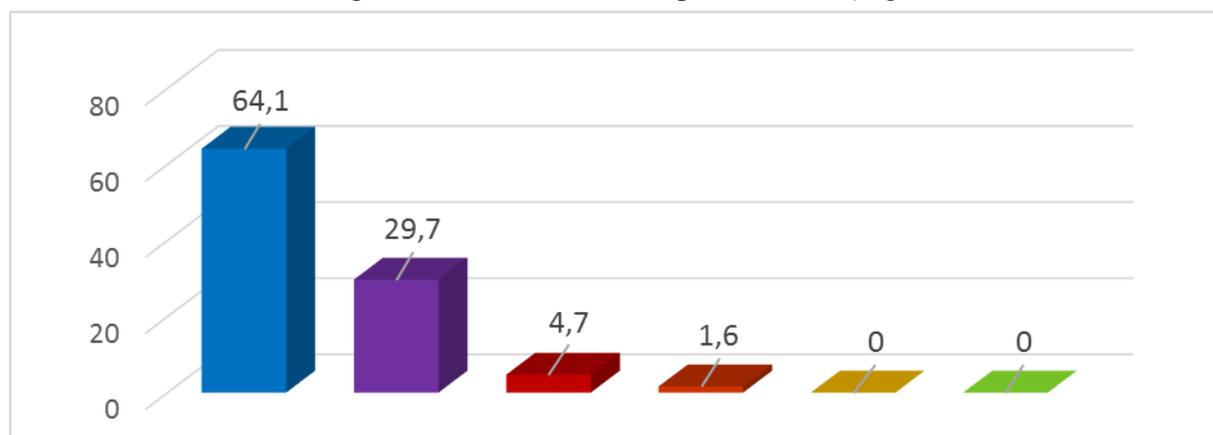


| responses  | number | percentage |
|--|--------|------------|
| behavior we should manifest when in contact with other people                      | 51     | 79.7%      |
| politeness among people  | 41     | 64.1%      |
| values we should accept and assert in our lives                                    | 36     | 56.3%      |
| rules we should respect and follow   | 16     | 25%        |
| voluntary and appropriate behavior regardless of the laws and rules                | 12     | 18.8%      |
| formal compliance with the rules, non-compliance with which is not punished anyway | 5      | 7.8%       |
| commitments we should fulfill  | 2      | 3.1%       |
| responsibilities delimiting what we should do                                      | 1      | 1.6%       |
| laws that cannot be broken because there are sanctions for this                    | 0      | 0%         |

Fig. 4. What ethics reflects  
Source: author's research

When answering this question, respondents could choose three of the given options. The representation of the individual responses suggests that students assign competence-related responsibility to ethics as to the quality of interpersonal relations based on voluntary adherence to the agreed rules within social interaction and the acceptance of value which contribute to the improvement of a person's life. Only a small percentage of the addressed students (12.5%) perceive ethics as a sanction regulator of interpersonal relations. The given viewpoints clearly manifest a pro-socially oriented potential of ethical regulation among students. This is a very significant finding, mainly due to the fact that since students themselves perceive ethics in this way, it suggests openness and willingness to support it and contribute to developing relations based on accepting the given preconditions.

Content-wise, with regard to the options students could to choose from, the next question appears very interesting as well. It was meant to find out where students, future professionals in their respective fields, see the importance and significance of ethics itself. The alternatives were purposefully phrased and set from the most positive to the most negative point of view, in connection how meaningful ethics is viewed in a person's life (Fig. 4).



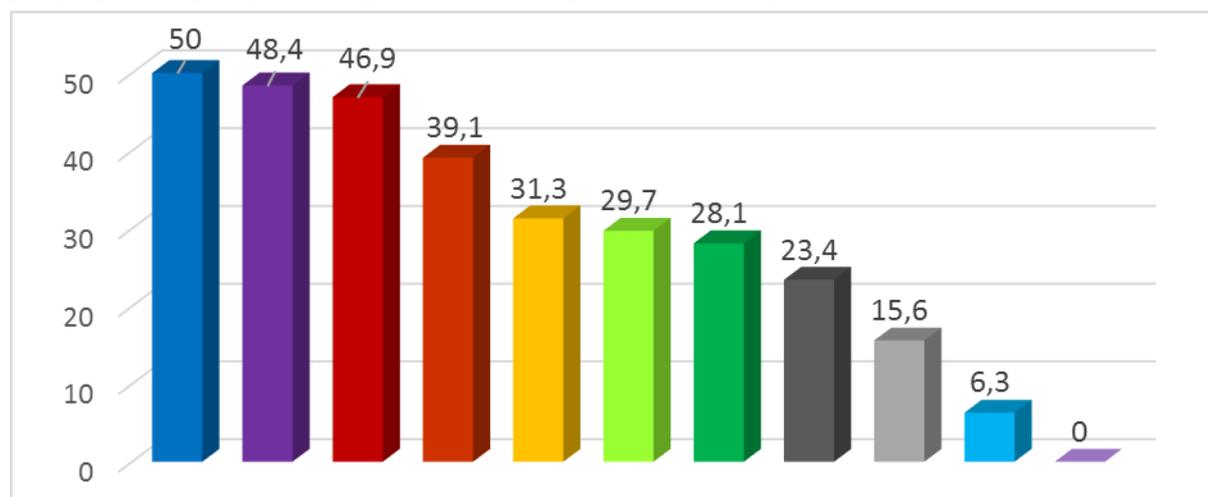
| responses   | number | percentage |
|---|--------|------------|
| It helps to acquire the basic rules of decency and culture of expression. | 41     | 64.1%      |
| It teaches people how to be considerate and perceptive towards others.    | 19     | 29.7%      |
| It points out what it should be, while the reality is different.          | 3      | 4.7%       |
| It provides directions and methods how to solve ethical problems.         | 1      | 1.6%       |
| It has no value for me as it is useless anyway.                           | 0      | 0%         |
| Moral behavior is individual, everyone can do what they want.             | 0      | 0%         |

Fig. 5. Perception of the importance of ethics

Source: author's research

If we attempt to interpret the scale of responses (while there was only one possible choice), we can see a very positive trend, i.e. respondents not being skeptical. Constructive perception of the importance of ethics (as ethics of relations) prevails. (93.8%).

The last question we wish to evaluate for the needs of this paper relates to perceptiveness of students towards the most serious social issues. These, naturally, concern different aspects of social life, i.e. economics, politics, quality of life, or the environment. The scale of the responses was structured in such way that the individual problematic areas had an immanent ethical background, or suggested an ethical failure. The obtained responses (while students could choose up to four) thus indicate certain value preferences of the respondents when judging the urgency and importance of the given issues (Fig. 6).



| responses   | number | percentage |
|---|--------|------------|
| 'unhealthy' interpersonal relations, disregard and indifference   | 32     | 50%        |
| low moral level and weak moral principles of the competent individuals, i.e. those who are in charge of making decisions about the country, politics, and economics | 31     | 48.4%      |

|  |    |       |
|--|----|-------|
| unethical practices in the public sector, i.e. filling the posts and functions formally, manipulated public tenders, abuse of information and power, bribery, etc. | 30 | 46.9% |
| lack of honesty, politeness, and reliability in most jobs and professions  | 29 | 45.3% |
| corruption among the political and economic elites   | 25 | 39.1% |
| harming the environment (environmental problems)   | 20 | 31.3% |
| increasing gap in social inequalities (affluence and poverty)  | 19 | 29.7% |
| cronyism and nepotism  | 18 | 28.1% |
| inconsiderate consuming lifestyle  | 15 | 23.4% |
| unethical practices in the private sector (tax evasions, kickbacks, tunneling)   | 10 | 15.6% |
| tolerance of citizens towards unethical practices and their weak engagement in society's issues  | 4  | 6.3%  |
| other  | 0  | 0%    |

Fig. 6. The most serious ethical problems in the Slovak society  
Source: author's research

As it can be seen, the society's economic and political issues and unethical practices occurring in these areas of public life, are evaluated negatively by respondents, and completed with ethical problems related to interpersonal relations. These are relations in general, i.e. 'unhealthy' interpersonal relations, disregard and indifference, but also the absence of professional competences, i.e. the lack of moral virtues such as honesty, politeness, or reliability at performing one's job or profession. Sensitivity towards this type of ethical problems and their negative evaluation enable us to assume that in their professional life, respondents will have a tendency to avoid such behaviors that they condemn.

### 3. Conclusion

The results of the conducted survey have shown some interesting knowledge about the researched issue. The performed and presented value survey analysis is clearly manifesting that there is a broad enough platform for further cultivation of ethical competences among the current generation of students. It is mainly critical self-evaluation of the level of current ethical erudition, which has been assessed as average, which points out to significant reserves in developing and extending the basic knowledge of ethics and its importance, mainly in the professional life of future university graduates.

From the point of view of ethical values, there is a large potential to build upon. The students' awareness of ethical issues, problems, and the need to solve them is high and

constructively focused. Moral predispositions and expectations of students are open to further penetration of new information and knowledge. This attitude creates an adequate potential for acquiring the needed skills and abilities, which are known as moral competences of an individual. We define them as a capability of an individual to achieve moral judgments on the basis of his personal principles, and to act in accordance with these principles (Lajčiaková, 2003). As a component of professional competences, moral competences complement the overall professionalism of a university graduate. The most important and the most required qualities are the following:

- sense for justice,
- sense for responsibility and fulfilling duties,
- honest behavior,
- decent, polite behavior,
- adherence to principles and rules,
- fulfilling obligations and promises,
- self-control and non-conflict behavior,
- empathy and understanding towards others.

The first precondition to acquiring the given competences is realizing their value foundation, i.e. understanding which moral values these competences are based on. It is understanding the values by getting an insight into their meaning and significance, respect towards such behavior that is based on these values, and further transformation of this understanding into establishing own opinions, attitudes, and value judgments, which in fact cultivates the personality of an individual. If these conditions do not apply, it is only a formal, superficial, and a verbally declared commitment to ethics and to the requirements for ethical behavior. The reality and the unpleasant situation in our society in relation to high level of corruption, occurrence of numerous cases which show signs of ethical failure, are a proof of the absence of adequate ethical competence of those people who are involved in these cases.

The conducted survey has shown a way to prevent such cases from occurring. It is essential that by being morally and professionally competent, future university graduates contribute to reducing, and not increasing, the mentioned unethical practices. It should be them who, in the near future, i.e. after graduating from university, will contribute to recovery and development of the whole society by making responsible decisions. As far as the university studies provide them with opportunities, future graduates should engage in such behavior within their professional practice, which allows them not to cross the limits of professional and ethical tolerance. Such education, which supports and enhances parallel development of both the professional as well as moral erudition, guarantees complete fulfillment of the graduates' career goals.

Contribution originated in resolving project VEGA 1/0187/16 "Post-fundacionalism perspective in (applied) ethics.

## Bibliography

1. Clarkeburn, H. M.: Measuring Ethical Development in Life Sciences Students: a study using Perry's developmental model. In: *Studies in Higher Education*, 2003, roč. 28, č. 4, s. 443 – 457.
2. Hrehová, D.: Vyučovanie podnikateľskej etiky (prehľadová štúdia). *Pedagogika.sk*, roč. 2, 2011, č. 4, s. 275 – 294.
3. Kalousková, P., Vojtěch, J.: Potřeby zaměstnavatelů a připravenost absolventů škol – souhrnný pohled, 2008. [online]. Dostupné: [http://www.nuov.cz/uploads/Vzdelavani\\_a\\_TP/Potreby\\_zamestnavatele\\_souhrn.pdf](http://www.nuov.cz/uploads/Vzdelavani_a_TP/Potreby_zamestnavatele_souhrn.pdf) [cit. 23.03.2016].
4. Kleštincová, L.: Spájame vysoké školy s trhom práce. Bratislava : Inštitút hospodárskej politiky, n. o., 2011 [online]. Dostupné: <http://www.ihp.sk/analyzy/IHP-Analyza%20-%20Spajame%20VS%20s%20TP.pdf> [cit. 11-03-2016].
5. Kohlberg, L.: Moral stages and moralization: The cognitive-developmental point of view. In: T. Lickona (Ed.): *Moral development and behavior: Theory, research and social issues*. New York : Holt, 1976, p. 31 – 53.
6. Kohlberg, L.: The domain and development of moral judgement. In: FISCHER, K.W. 1980. *A theory of cognitive development: the control and construction of hierarchies of skills*. *Psychological review*, Vol. 87, Issue 6, November 1980, p. 477 – 531.
7. Kozáková, E.: Absolventi na trhu práce [online]. Dostupné: <http://rady-a-tipy.monster.cz/hledani-prace/jak-zacit-s-hledanimprace/absolventi-na-trhu-prace/article.aspx> [cit. 11-03-2016].
8. Kuzior A.: Development of competences key to sustainable development. *Zeszyty naukowe Politechniki Slaskiej. Seria: Organizacja i zarzadzanie z. 75*, 2014, s. 71 – 81.
9. Lajčiaková, P.: Morálna kompetencia ako spôsobilosť morálne konať (?). In: Sarmány Schuller, I. (ed.), *Práca a jej kontexty*. Bratislava : Stimul. 2003.
10. Lesáková, D., Dzimko, M., Farkašová, V.: Uplatnenie absolventov vysokých škôl na trhu práce [online]. Dostupné: [http://www.cvtisr.sk/buxus/docs/MK/Studie/Uplatnenie\\_pre\\_tlac.pdf](http://www.cvtisr.sk/buxus/docs/MK/Studie/Uplatnenie_pre_tlac.pdf) [cit. 10-03-2016].
11. Liessmann, K. P.: *Teorie nevzdělanosti – Omyly společnosti vědění*. Praha: Academia, 2009. 125 s.
12. Martinkovičová, M., Benčíková, D.: The usable competences of graduates in practice. In: *Międzynarodwa interdyscyplinarna konferencja naukowa rozwój społeczny wobec wartości: etyka – technika – społeczeństwo*. Wisła : Politechnika Slaska, 2016, pp. 137 – 149.
13. Yang, F. Y.: Student views concerning evidence and the expert in reasoning a socio-scientific issue and personal epistemology. In: *Educational Studies*, 2005, roč. 31, č. 1, s. 65 – 84.