

REPORT

Ethics education — an imperative for future generations: Report on the 13th International Conference on Ethics Education

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Abstract

The 13th International Conference on Ethics Education, themed "Ethics Education: An Imperative for Future Generations," brought together global scholars to address contemporary ethical challenges spanning critical areas of bioethics, technology ethics, ethics in schools and higher education, and research ethics in the digital age. Diverse ethical arguments, philosophical foundations and belief systems were presented, accommodating the changing, challenging contexts of our times. A recurring emphasis was on the need for interdisciplinary, experiential ethics education that fosters critical thinking and a holistic understanding of individuals and the planet, moving beyond mere knowledge transfer to preparing future generations for complex moral landscapes.

Keywords: ethics education, IAEE, human dignity, ethics and future generations, global bioethics, India

Background and structure of the conference

The International Association for Education in Ethics (IAEE) conference is an internationally recognised event that brings together thought leaders and educators from various fields to address the pressing ethical challenges of our time. Under the theme, "Ethics Education: An Imperative for Future Generations," the 13th annual conference hosted by St John's National Academy of Health Sciences, Bengaluru, India, in collaboration with the IAEE, Pennsylvania, USA, featured keynote addresses, plenary talks from cross cultural perspectives; oral presentations of abstracts submitted; mini-workshops and panel discussions led by the knowledge partners; poster presentations, and an evening of cultural performances. The main conference had a total of 330 registered delegates, with 150 participants in four pre-conference workshops.

Setting the tone: the inaugural session

Dr BC Bhagavan, Vice Chancellor of Rajiv Gandhi University of Health Sciences, Karnataka, emphasised that in a world of rapid scientific and socio-political change, ethics provides a critical framework for healthcare and education. Dr Henk ten Have, Professor Emeritus, Center for Healthcare Ethics, Duquesne University, USA, and Acting President of the IAEE, highlighted the role of the IAEE as a global centre of ethics education. Quoting St Augustine, he said that education should motivate and inspire and not merely transfer knowledge. Dr BN Gangadhar, Chairman of the National Medical Commission of India, stressed the need to view

patients holistically, not just as persons with a disease, and reinforced the principle of "Do no harm." The conference chairperson, Rev Dr Charles Davis, underscored the collective responsibility of educators and global citizens to instil values of dignity and responsibility for the holistic health of both humanity and the planet.

Overarching themes and plenaries

Supplementary Table 1, available online only.

Ethics education, legal education and philosophy of law

Plenary speakers on this theme stressed the need to update laws *ethically* to suit the fast-moving world of technological advancement and emphasised the importance of ethical literacy and of anticipatory ethics. Ethics and moral values are woven into the fabric of law, but legal education today is not equipped to teach this to students. Students should be encouraged to form moral and ethical convictions. Justice should not depend exclusively on maxims of interpretation, on an illusion of certainty. Legal controversies should be settled by applying ethical principles to legal theories.

Human dignity and inclusiveness: from human health to planetary health

Medical ethics, once the exclusive prerogative of healthcare professionals, expanded into Bioethics, and was later broadened to Global Bioethics (GB), encompassing the individual, society, and the planet. GB's grounding canon is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with human dignity as its fundamental basis [1]. As Professor ten Have put it "*Dignity is not a grand narrative but a thousand humble stories and small everyday acts*." Other speakers introduced the idea of cosmological interdependence which encompasses human dignity, a clear move beyond anthropocentric understanding. The common thread of dignity was established as "inherent worth" that connects to "sacredness", which is advocated by various religions [2,3].

In parallel track sessions, "responsibility fatigue" and "normative pressure" were identified as key challenges in motivating teenagers to address planetary health, a moral imperative often undermined by media, corporate, and advertising influences that promote self-serving consumerism under the guise of autonomy and choice. Transformative ethical literacy would allow young people to imagine and negotiate the conditions of future living and critically reflect on familiar worldviews, through peer group

discussions, engagement of local communities and federal institutions.

Bioethics, health profession education and application in clinical challenges

This section draws upon case studies from the United States (US), Italy and India. Dr Krishnaswami presented a case for the US, where novel formulations of ethics education and ethics consultation for clinicians and healthcare workers, and health ethics literacy for patients and their families are in place. Italian ethicists discussed the challenges involved in the identification of the remains of the dead; the role of ethics education of concerned professionals; and approaches followed at a children's hospital to address miscommunication and paediatric ethical dilemmas through a case study approach, integrating clinical practice and internal reflection. A common theme in the Indian presentations was that current educational curricula did not prepare practitioners for real world, practical challenges. Paternalism, where supervisors make the decision on behalf of the trainee, is the norm. A more "aspirational framework" through proper acculturation, nurturing moral sensitivity through reflective writing, assessments, therapy sessions with trainees, "ethics autobiography" and "ethics genogram" sessions were suggested. The power of storytelling in ethics education was also described, showing how it enhances moral reasoning and builds an understanding of the "other".

Structural considerations in public health ethics, business ethics, public life and ethics education for a good society

Following a public health ethics approach, a multi-disciplinary panel of community health activists and academics, led by the non-governmental organisation, the Society for Community Health Awareness Research and Action (SOCHARA), emphasised the need to extend ethics education beyond the hospital and into the community. The discussion, which centred on subaltern perspectives, highlighted discrimination, non-compliance, and implicit biases in healthcare that contribute to structural racism, health disparity, and health inequity. The panel stressed the importance of addressing power dynamics and advocating for transparency and procedural justice to ensure a more equitable healthcare system.

The plenary session focussed on ethics and corruption using a systems approach. Ethical behaviour was said to reflect institutional and not merely individual values. As Sri Raghunandan emphasised, corruption flourishes when allowed by an institution which does not hold its employees accountable. When corruption becomes an accepted norm in public office, getting a "cut" in medical practice is not seen as corruption but perceived as a "smart business strategy".

In the context of business ethics, Professor Wilcoxson stressed that the curriculum must be inter-disciplinary and help young

people distinguish between utilitarian ethics and virtue ethics. Citing the Gandhian vision of a virtuous society, environmental educator and Gandhian scholar, Pallavi Verma, stated that the concept of *Swaraj* represents more than political independence; it signifies "rule over oneself".

Ethics in education — from schools to higher education

Professor Gordijn observed that across primary and secondary education, loss of the professional autonomy of teachers and reduced engagement of students have emerged as Artificial Intelligence (AI) dominates education modules. AI systems can provide personalised instruction in structured domains like mathematics, language learning; and coping with adaptive difficulty based on student performance, offer unlimited patience and consistent quality. Conversely, AI lacks the genuine understanding of student confusion, emotional needs, and developmental readiness that skilled human tutors can provide. Priya Muthukumar recalled that storytelling is the oldest form of education and used to be presented using traditional art forms like "*Harikatha*"¹ and "*Yakshagāna*"². This pedagogy connects virtues and values with rhythm and theatre, helping them last longer in the memory than facts or truths alone.

Meghna Achar, a researcher working with children exposed to domestic parental violence, emphasised the ethical complexities of such research and the delicate balance between protection and participation, challenging the pervasive "rampant childism" that sees children as inherently "incompetent". The exclusion of chronically sick children's perspectives and needs in schools and institutions was raised by medical intern Elizabeth Sanson, with participant teachers discussing ways to incorporate fairness and kindness.

To help build ethically reflexive communities, Azim Premji University's School of Development teaches normative ethics through interactive methodology. This includes student-centred activities like film screening and discussions, and analytical worksheets designed to encourage critical reflection. A 32-week project, with eight weeks of student-driven, field-based research aimed at building a just society, promoted collaborative learning with communities and encouraged incremental growth in field engagement. Mental health courses in higher education called for embedding ethics of stigma, and the prevalent use of jargon and labels, especially concerning culturally nuanced expressions of suffering.

Presenter Akash Srinivas asserted that archaeology courses in the country lack dedicated ethics training, and a colonial legacy keeps this research state controlled. Ethics education would encompass appropriate field conduct, respectful interaction with stakeholders, and guidelines on ownership of material and data sharing.

Research ethics education — from people centredness to research oversight in the digital age

People centric approaches in medical research had panel discussions led by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) Bioethics Unit to address what people wanted from research, what researchers must do, and what ethics committees can do. A research study presentation by Prof Savitha D revealed that postgraduates and faculty poorly understand the ethical nuances of framing and administering informed consent. Dr Pooja Harish's presentation highlighted the lack of awareness among researchers about therapeutic misconception in clinical research. Widening the ethics lens of research review to include intersectionality issues in LGBTQIAP+ was underscored as a necessity by Ritash and Deeksha Pandey. This included understanding the harms of community homogenisation, extractive practices without community benefit, and a lack of culturally sensitive consent protocols.

In a roundtable discussion led by Yenepoya University in collaboration with the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment and Ethics and Research Integrity Policy (CoARA-ERIP) Foundation, ethical, legal, and epistemic concerns surrounding AI-generated content emerged and a re-evaluation of traditional research assessment metrics was advocated. It was suggested that the need to prioritise a qualitative lens over purely quantitative metrics would be aided by a flexible tool such as the "Modular Assessment Configurator" which would require institutional efforts, including AI literacy for researchers, balancing innovation with academic freedom at national and international levels, and coordinated efforts for research funding to ensure its success.

Technology advancement and ethics

There were thought-provoking presentations on the ethics of creativity, human enhancement and future of health data spaces. They included a brief history of chimeras and organoids which reminded us that creativity is not merely an innovation but an ontological act of bringing new realities into existence. Furthermore, creativity has a social dimension, requiring a dialogue between the creator, the society witnessing the creation, and the potential future that results from it [4]. Creativity must thus lead to responsible innovation, which asks, "if we *should* really be doing this?" and not "if we *can* do this?" That ethical concerns regarding human enhancement stem from tension between its therapeutic applications and its odyssey to fulfil "perfection" was noted by Rev Arnold Mahesh, while Prof Francis Crawley raised the key ethical concerns regarding sentient AI as epistemic integrity and sovereignty, and the need for professionals to understand their responsibility in managing health data spaces. New concepts of cyberthanatology and digital immortality covered by Prof Fontanini raised the ethical questions of how we remember those who have died, the AI simulation of life

after death, and the importance of striking a balance between the right to be forgotten versus how we want to be remembered.

Interdisciplinary ethics education and cross-cultural ethics education perspectives

This session foregrounded the capacity of art to shape human behaviour and enhance ethical awareness. The speakers stressed that the use of the humanities as a pedagogical tool in ethics education is essential for a pluralistic understanding of complex, dynamic phenomena. A reiteration of the need for teaching virtue ethics to build a person's character with emphasis on values, ability to recognise virtue in others and transform environments came through several presentations. Bio-aesthetics, art and sculpture, humanities methods such as visual stories, narratives, and dance theatre as pedagogical triggers, can all enable emotional as well as rational responses to ethics learning.

A panel discussion on cross-cultural experiences of ethics education highlighted its journey in the United States from being confined to medical and nursing schools in the '70's to now being offered as vocational training for ethics consultants in hospitals. It was interesting to note that in Mexico, universities offered ethics fellowships and research programmes covering anthropology, humanities, real-world problems, contemporary and historical ethical dilemmas, ethical and legal issues in medical ethics, and ethics of big data in health. In the Indian context, the role of St John's Medical College as a pioneer in medical ethics teaching was highlighted. In the wider context, the unethical practices of doctors, and legal and regulatory policies against patient interests, were the trigger for a bioethics movement grounded in secular and rational thinking and the birth of the *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics*.

Conclusion and the way forward

This conference was multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, exciting, and enriching. It inspired the participants to practice and teach ethics in an inter-disciplinary manner, while upholding the core values and principles of human rights and bioethics. Ethical arguments, philosophical rationales and belief systems need to be pluralistic and should accommodate changing, and challenging times and situations. The internalisation of values and ethics in institutions, whether schools, colleges, or public spaces, is essential for individuals to learn, believe in and practise ethics.

Across the world, there is still a lack of standalone ethics courses and consequently, of trained ethics educators. This along with "anticipatory ethics" research, especially from the global south, is critical for ethics education to be relevant for future generations.

Notes:

¹ *Harikatha* is a traditional South Indian art form blending storytelling, music, poetry, drama, and dance to narrate Hindu epics and Puranas, conveying cultural, religious, and philosophical values.

² *Yakshagāna* literally means the song (gāna) of the yaksha (nature spirits). It is a dance-drama of the southern Indian state of Karnataka.

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