

# Navigating the swampy lowlands: Higher education staff perspectives on the construction of professional identities through moral education within professional and community-facing degree programmes

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## ABSTRACT

### *Purpose*

This research aimed to examine university staff perceptions of moral and ethical training on programmes where graduates will become community-facing, such as policing and youth and community work.

### *Design/methodology/approach.*

Qualitative data was gathered via semi-structured focus sessions with staff from Cardiff Metropolitan University and the University of South Wales. Five participants from across the institutions volunteered to participate.

### *Findings*

Higher education is a valuable tool for the moral and ethical education of students studying for community-facing roles. Key considerations included the relationship between personal ontologies and professional boundaries, safe spaces to address complex ethical issues and unconscious bias and preparing students using real-world examples from practice. The academics constructed their identities through their professional roles; this impacts their personal ontologies and their teaching.

**Practical implications**

- Universities are an important vehicle for the formative construction of professional identity around the scaffold of professional standards, codes of practice and legislation.
- Moral and ethical education offers the opportunity to support students to feel empowered to push back against normative social influences when they reach employment.
- There is a need for safe spaces within universities for both staff and students to discuss moral and ethical issues that arise in practice.
- Clinical supervision models may be a useful template for the supervision of both staff and students within higher education settings.

**Originality**

Previous research in this field has predominantly focussed on moral and ethical training within qualified community professionals as opposed to within higher education classrooms. The desire for supervision has also not been documented widely within these spheres.

**Keywords:** clinical supervision, professional practice, higher education, ethics, education

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## Introduction

In this study, we investigate the role and application of moral philosophy in the contemporary higher education classroom. Paying specific attention to the practitioners that deliver on community-facing programmes such as professional policing, youth and community studies and criminology at universities in South Wales. Within Wales, there are five institutions delivering professional policing programmes, two in North Wales and the remainder in South Wales (College of Policing, 2024). This pattern is also present for youth and community courses, where they are offered across six institutions within Wales, only one in North Wales and the remainder in South Wales (UCAS, 2024). Given that many of these graduates will go on to work within these community-facing settings within Wales, it is of paramount importance that we understand how ethics and morality are taught within these programmes. We therefore sought to examine this through

discussion with academics within South Wales, where the majority of these students are learning.

### **Moral philosophy in professional education**

Kristjánsson (2025), editor of the *Journal of Modern Education*, states that the journal has always published studies relating to moral education in higher education institutions, with a focus on professional ethics education of those involved in compulsory education. Scholarly attention has traditionally concentrated on earlier stages of schooling, however, Kristjánsson goes on to explain that recent submissions signal a clear shift in this pattern, as the focus of moral education research expands upward to encompass higher education more broadly, beyond its earlier confinement to compulsory schooling and select professional programmes, such as teaching and medicine. Kristjánsson further emphasises that the field of moral education is rapidly changing, especially in global higher education.

For example, Cheng, Wang and Wang (2021, p. 2256), define moral education as ‘all activities that purposefully and systematically exert influence on members of society in terms of politics, ideology, and morality’. However, their study highlights that the specific mechanisms in which these influences are exerted on the public were often applied towards the specific goals and ideals of the state and were less about developing criticality towards perspectives that might challenge these goals and ideals.

Cheng, Wang, and Wang adopt a somewhat Marxist perspective in their analysis and suggest that this is likely due to the function of education, especially in China, often being geared towards fulfilling the employment needs of the society in which the student lives, as opposed to theoretical or ideological ideals. A further criticism highlighted by their research was that higher education students often did not digest the nature or purpose of moral education in their experiences of being in higher education, criticising implicit moral education as lacking authentic practice and application. Highlighting a key challenge where moral education was not explicitly discussed, even when the pedagogical planning was, as described, meticulous in its inclusion of moral education.

Hand (2018) discusses the theoretical underpinnings of moral education in Western education, and places emphasis on the difference between moral

education and moral indoctrination in classrooms. Hand suggests that indoctrination is the antithesis of education because it uses non-rational practices, such as bullying, to impose one person or groups belief onto another.

The purpose of moral education, therefore, according to Hand, is to ensure that students subscribe to and uphold the moral standards of society without employing non-rational practices to do so. Moral education should permit students to develop critical thinking skills that enable them to challenge moral thinking and the justifications that underpin certain practices. To that end, Hambrick (2020) advocates that teachers should use a variety of carefully crafted moral dilemmas that permit the students to investigate a variety of possible positions on the subject, before applying specific moral lenses, such as professional codes of practice (Hambrick, 2020; Hand, 2018). King and Mayhew (2002) support this application of situational-based classroom learning and further found dramatic gains in the engagement of students when this type of learning took place.

Finding an adequate and contextually appropriate definition or theoretical underpinning on which to base this study on is at best challenging, or at worst a semantic minefield (Berkowitz, 2016). Berkowitz, much like Kristjánsson (2025), describes how the different definitions of moral education that are applied to the field of study often differ only in their contextual application. However, what they also agree on, which is helpful in the attempt to define moral education as applied to Higher Education, is that practitioners of moral education should look to the shared spaces that are common to these different definitions. In its simplest form, Berkowitz (2016) defines moral education as the socialisation of 'each subsequent generation to contributors to, and not detractors from, the common good; to nurture caring and justice in the world'. Berkowitz further explores this definition by collapsing the differences often contended within the field of moral education and suggests that these practices often contain the following principles: a focus on social competencies such as social-emotional learning, socio-moral critical thinking competencies, or on the civic, citizenship, or democratic education of members within society. This definition aligns well with the principles underpinning this study – as the research focuses on moral education practices in community-facing higher education programmes, Berkowitz's (2016) emphasis on developing students committed to the common good closely reflects the study's core ethos.

In addition to contested definitions of moral education, the relevance of moral philosophy to contemporary education is a common and contested debate

(Lewin, 2014). Corbo-Crehan (2019) outlines several concerns that have increasingly been raised about the inclusion of moral philosophy in professional settings including three core dilemmas that are relevant to this study:

Firstly, whether community-facing degree programmes should contain education on ethical and moral philosophy, or if moral philosophy should remain a standalone subject. Corbo-Crehan's study focused on policing education, but the findings and discussions are directly applicable to similar professions, so this argument is substantiated in the present study.

Secondly, the question of whether there should solely be deference to professional boundaries such as legislation, professional codes of practice, such as the 2024 updated policing codes of ethics (College of Policing, 2024), or other frameworks, such as the National Decision-Making Model (NDM). Where personal autonomy and personal ethics are encapsulated and reduced to their professional capacity within these frameworks alone.

Or conversely, whether moral education should be the remit of the moral philosopher, or of practice-based supervisors when it comes to teaching the ethical principles of respective professions.

The study makes recommendations that any attempt at teaching moral and ethical philosophy to potential student practitioners, should be targeted at enabling students to interrogate their own ethical decision-making practices, and for them to be able to justify these decisions. Corbo-Crehan stresses that existing frameworks, and even any perceptions that professionals such as police officers are inherently moral people, should be viewed with scepticism and caution. Furthermore, educators should ensure that moral philosophy is not dominated by either end of the scale relating to experience, e.g., whether such education is framed solely by practitioners, or solely by moral philosophers. It is important that practice is framed by critical theoretical and philosophical rigour, and that theoretical and philosophical discourse is underpinned by real-world practice and contextualisation.

### **Moral responsibility and unconscious bias**

An important question that is increasingly being asked within moral philosophy is the extent to which individuals are always responsible for the morality of their

actions. Philosophers, social scientists and psychologists have explored the many facets of moral responsibility (see, for example, the following reviews relating to free will [Feltz and Cova, 2014], development of moral identity [Krettenauer, 2022], attributionism [Talbert, 2022] and answerability [Kiener, 2024]). Psychological research has shown that people hold biases and have cognitions that they are not aware of. Of particular relevance here is unconscious bias, which can frequently inform decisions without the individual being aware of it. These unconscious biases can be in conflict with our professed and conscious beliefs (Suveren, 2022) and can undermine higher ethical decision making (Kahneman, 2012). Unconscious bias therefore has the capacity to undermine the possible impacts of moral education, unless those biases are identified allowing the individual to, over time, work to reduce them (Lai et al., 2013). Therefore, understanding biases is an important facet of early moral education (Korteling, et al., 2023).

Unconscious bias is caused by our efficient cognitions, which seek to make fast decisions or judgements, to support our smooth functioning within our environment (Greenwald and Banaji, 1995). Implicit or unconscious biases are automatic and unintentional stereotypes, that we have learned via our personal experiences, background, and society, and which influence our behaviour (Noon, 2018). These biases can relate to specific characteristics of others, for example, race, gender, age, and myriad other attributes. This can cause unequal treatment of others, and in professions that require individuals to interact with the diverse members of communities, it is particularly important for these individuals to understand and address their own biases when making decisions which impact the lives of the people they are supporting (Suveren, 2022).

Holroyd et al. (2017) suggest that one key question for moral philosophers, in the context of unconscious bias, is how it can impact our understanding of moral responsibility. Individuals can hold unconscious biases that are in direct opposition to their conscious beliefs and actions. If individuals are behaving in a biased way as a result of unconscious bias, but their conscious actions are in support of discriminated individuals, to what extent might we judge that person as moral or immoral? On an individual level, unconscious bias may have only a small impact on others, the issue, of course, is that unconscious biases tend to be collective as they are produced by being raised within a society at propagates such biases. The negative impacts are therefore widespread. So, it is important from a moral responsibility standpoint to consider whether the responsibility sits with the

individual to seek to understand and combat their own biases, whether it is the responsibility of an institution, or if it is the responsibility of the collective, of society as a whole. Currently, positive actions tend to sit within institutions, but these are often guided by organisations which govern or guide education on a national scale.

### *Combating unconscious bias in education*

In many professional organisations across the UK, staff are given training to combat unconscious bias. Across England and Wales, the College of Policing (Owens and Finn, 2018), the Education Workforce Council (Woolf et al., 2016), the Health and Care Professionals Council (HCPC, 2023), Advance Higher Education (Advance HE), and the Senedd government (Senedd Cymru, 2021), as well as the government in Westminster (Lopez, 2020), all offer guidance on the role that agencies serve in educating and actioning national and agency policy and codes of practice.

In England and Wales, the College of Policing (2019) describe how officer training on unconscious bias is a requirement under the Policing Education Qualification Framework (PEQF). Serving police officers are given training to reduce their implicit or unconscious bias. As an example of this, the Metropolitan Police give new officers training on unconscious bias and its role in policing in their first two weeks of training (Metropolitan Police, 2023). However, research indicates that, generally, a single day of training does not produce long-term behaviour change (Young, 2023). Within the United States, researchers have been exploring the long-term impacts of training such as this, and though the impacts on the day are promising – with officers increasing their knowledge about, and motivation to reduce, bias – these effects do not persist one month after the training (Lai and Lisnek, 2023).

Given the potential for discrimination of those individuals whose characteristics others tend to be biased against, it is of utmost importance that researchers find the most effective vehicle for educating people and reducing their unconscious bias. FitzGerald et al. (2019) reviewed interventions designed to reduce implicit biases and stereotypes relating to race, gender, sexuality, religion, age, and weight. They concluded that there are too few high-quality empirical studies examining these interventions, and replication is needed. This continues to be the case, with Corsino and Fuller (2021) making similar conclusions in their review of current

equality, diversity, and inclusion educational approaches. At this stage, it is therefore unclear how we can most effectively educate future community practitioners and professionals to overcome their unconscious biases when making moral decisions.

### **Research goals**

Our research goals are therefore twofold. The first goal is seeking to further understand how, if at all, current higher education teaching staff perceive the relevance of moral philosophy to contemporary education rhetoric around moral and ethical education.

Our second goal is to investigate practitioner perspectives relating to the teaching of unconscious bias within education on moral decision-making, particularly in the education of those who will become practitioners and professionals within community settings.

Our research questions are therefore:

1. What relevance does moral philosophy have within the contemporary education of students within community-facing fields?
2. What information to increase awareness of unconscious bias are academic staff within community-facing fields using with their student practitioners in the classroom?

### **Methods**

#### ***Participants***

Participants were recruited via email. Emails were collated from the Cardiff Metropolitan University and University of South Wales webpages. A mailing list of all staff members that had expertise to teach on policing, criminology, youth and community work and social work programmes was created. No staff were filtered from this list if they met the above criterion. Staff who were interested in participating replied, via email, to the researchers directly. These programmes were

selected as there is overlap in terms of graduate roles that are a part of the criminal justice system or work closely with the criminal justice system (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2025) ethical conduct is therefore an important facet of these programmes. Of the participants recruited (n=5), two members of staff teach on policing and criminology programmes, and three members of staff teach on youth and community programmes. This research was conducted after having gained ethical approval from the School of Education and Social Policy Research Ethics Committee in Cardiff Metropolitan University (Approval code: CSESP20212307).

Participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identities. Participants had an average of 22.5 years of experience in community practice outside of teaching at higher education, with the most amount of experience being 32 years in practice, and the least being 2 years. Participants had a total average of 25.6 years combined years of experience in practice and education, with the most amount of total experience being 36 years, and the least being 22 years.

### *Sample size*

Our sample was able and willing to speak at length on the topics, this therefore allowed us to gather high-quality data from our participants. Morse (2000) suggests that where participants provide high-quality data, fewer participants are required to reach saturation. Within our analysis of the lived experiences provided by our participants, there was a lot of convergence within the responses our participants provided across the different areas of expertise, demonstrating that we had achieved saturation (Smith et al., 2022). However, Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that saturation alone, and indeed other traditional practices, such as triangulation and member checking, are not necessarily coherent with reflexive thematic analysis. Instead, they advocate the use of informational power, to determine theoretical sufficiency (Malterud et al., 2016). Malterud et al., discuss *informational power* as an effective metric for deciding upon sample size. This has five dimensions which impact informational power: Aim, Specificity, Theory, Dialogue and Analysis. Within our research, our aims are narrow, we have been specific in our chosen participants, there is established theory that is applied to our findings, the quality of dialogue within our research is strong and we are conducting in-depth analysis of narratives. According to Malterud et al. these suggest higher informational power and therefore less of a need

for larger sample sizes. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2019) discuss how meaning is *generated* through interpretation of the data, and not *excavation*, and therefore judgements around deciding how many participants are ‘enough’ or ‘sufficient’ are subjective and cannot be determined in advance of data analysis. This study is the result of the first stage of an iterative project, exploring the role that moral education plays in the higher-education classroom. The findings and recommendations in this paper are intended to highlight the themes that arose following data collection from the sample in higher education institutions used in this first stage.

Given the above, our sample of five participants is sufficient to draw useful conclusions about the practices within these specific HE classrooms.

### ***Materials***

During the interviews, the participants were asked:

1. About their previous experience in practice.
2. To outline their use, if any, of ethical and moral frameworks within their teaching practice.
3. To outline ways in which they teach students about unconscious bias.

### ***Paradigm and data analysis***

We aligned ourselves to a pragmatic research paradigm. We had specific research questions relating to understanding moral and ethical education in community-facing degree programmes. We have therefore utilised qualitative methods as the most effective avenue for investigating current practices and the nuances of attitudes relating to these practices.

We utilised reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2022) framework. The first phase requires researchers to familiarise themselves with the dataset. To do this, each researcher transcribed data from the interviews they did not conduct. Together, we checked the transcriptions for accuracy and immersed ourselves in the transcripts. In the second phase, coding, we identified meaningful parts of the transcripts and coded them. These codes were validated collaboratively by the researchers. These were a mix of semantic and latent codes, pulled from the data using inductive coding. When generating the initial themes,

both researchers worked to identify patterns within the dataset. Many of these helped to answer our research questions, however, there were candidate themes that did not align with our research questions. In the fourth phase, both researchers developed and reviewed these themes by going back to the original dataset and the initial codes. Here we reduced, split, or removed themes so that each had a central organising concept. In the refining, defining and naming phase, we closely examined each theme and gathered them into one document where each theme was defined and considered in relation to our research questions. Here, we discovered that we had answered our research questions but also generated answers to questions we had not asked. These are perhaps our valuable findings. The final phase of reflexive thematic analysis is the write-up. Aligning with the conventions developed by Braun and Clarke (2022), we began writing in phase three when we gathered our initial themes. We made informal notes on the key messages that we drew from the transcripts. These notes fed into our table of themes created in the fourth phase and the document containing our defined and named themes in the fifth phase.

### ***Procedure***

Participants were emailed directly, using their university email accounts. The email outlined the purpose of the research and provided an information sheet outlining their involvement if they chose to participate. This information included: the purpose of the research, the likely areas that participants would discuss, a rationale for their being contacted, the protocol of the focus session, how the findings of the project would be utilised, the ways in which their data and privacy would be protected, their right to withdraw, any risks associated with taking part and finally, the benefits of the research. If they were interested in taking part, and happy with the information provided, they indicated their informed consent via the completion of a consent form ahead of the meeting time arranged to suit the participants. They also provided their subject area specialism, the number of years they worked in their respective area of practice and higher education.

Before the conversations with participants began, they were reminded of their right to withdraw, the processes via which data will be kept anonymous and asked again to give their consent to be recorded as part of the interview and for quotes to be used in any publications.

Participants were asked questions relating to the key areas outlined above using a semi-structured approach, which allowed us to explore specific or unforeseen aspects of responses. Once participants felt they had exhausted all topics relating to the questions provided, they were thanked for their time and provided with a debrief which further outlined the goals of the research, relevant literature and contact details for several support services should they feel they need additional support either in the context of their institution or with the potentially sensitive topics discussed.

## **Findings and discussion**

### *Findings*

The analysis generated six interrelated themes that describe how higher education practitioners understand and enact moral and ethical decision-making within professionally oriented programmes. Across themes, participants situated their accounts in specific professional, andragogical, and institutional contexts, often drawing on lived experience to explain how moral judgement is formed, constrained, and taught. The findings presented below integrate these situated narratives to demonstrate how participants articulated their experiences.

#### *Theme 1: Clearly defined professional boundaries*

Participants consistently framed professional boundaries comprising legislation, professional standards, and codes of practice as the primary reference point for ethical decision-making. These boundaries were described as providing clarity in situations where personal values alone were insufficient. One participant situated this within the context of policing practice, describing how legal frameworks functioned as an anchor when facing moral uncertainty:

[You ask yourself] what's the right thing to do? And if you've got a legal framework, it makes it easier because you know whether you can or you can't. (Edward)

Professional boundaries were described as separating personal morality from professional responsibility. Participants emphasised that while personal values

Table 1: Summary of themes

<b><i>Theme 1: Clearly Defined Professional Boundaries – The impact of National Professional Standards, Codes of Practice, and Legislation in shaping individual values and principles.</i></b>
1.1 Participants demonstrated an overall deference to deontology and professional boundaries. 1.2 The relationship between the values and principles of staff and students in shaping professional identity.
<b><i>Theme 2: Navigating the swampy lowlands: professional experience as a foundation for individual professional ethics.</i></b>
2.1 The role of personal experience in shaping professional identity. 2.2 The importance of multiagency work for the development of professional morality. 2.3 The roles and perceptions of the self in professional settings.
<b><i>Theme 3: The impact of normative social influence on moral decision-making.</i></b>
3.1 The role of the professional institution and normative influence on the group and the individual. 3.2 The role of education in promoting autonomy of action.
<b><i>Theme 4: The role of higher education as a vehicle for moral education.</i></b>
4.1 The role of moral education in higher education teaching practices. 4.2 The use of specific moral theory in classroom androgogies. 4.3 Barriers to the effective delivery of moral education in higher education.
<b><i>Theme 5: Creating safe spaces to discuss morality and unconscious bias.</i></b>
5.1 To facilitate discussions around morality. 5.2 Safe spaces as a means of understanding and combating unconscious bias.
<b><i>Theme 6: Non-clinical supervision in HE.</i></b>
6.1 The desire to move towards a Model of Non-Clinical Supervision in HE. 6.2 Benefits to the university and to practice. 6.3 Potential Barriers.

informed how decisions were experienced emotionally, boundaries determined what actions were permissible. This distinction was particularly salient where legal consequences were possible. Edward, reflecting on decision-making in law enforcement, stated that regardless of individual beliefs, ‘the framework of the law [is] the construct that you’ve got to work within’.

Participants also described how professional boundaries shape professional identity through education and training. Situated narratives from higher education

settings highlighted dissatisfaction with generic online training, which was perceived as detached from practice. Edward described mandatory ethics and equality training as procedural rather than formative:

They're a bit starchy, and they don't really come to life ... you might have to do some sort of mandatory training every 12 months ... if you get it wrong, you just do it again until you get it right ... it just gets ticked off.

In contrast, participants situated effective moral education within professionally endorsed programmes. Lara described how national quality standards were integrated into youth and community work education:

Because we would teach professionally endorsed courses, there's a set of quality standards ... that our programme adheres to ... this is about bringing it in at the various levels to ensure that students get a grasp of it and can put it into their practice.

Classroom-based engagement with professional boundaries was also described as generating tension, particularly where students' personal beliefs conflicted with professional expectations. Adelaide framed these tensions as pedagogically valuable rather than problematic:

I would have some students who have a very strong faith. I have other students who have no faith ... don't be afraid of those tensions ... that's where the knowledge is.

Participants further situated professional decision-making within public-facing contexts, noting how rigid adherence to rules could affect community relationships. Edward illustrated this through a policing example involving discretion:

If you want to be binary, has the law been broken? Yes ... but actually discretion, as long as it's legal and you can justify your decision making, might give you different options ... it might be the last interaction he has with the police for a long, long time.

### *Theme 2: Navigating the 'swampy lowlands' of practice*

Participants repeatedly described professional practice as complex and unpredictable, contrasting lived experience with the relative clarity of formal guidance. This complexity was often articulated through metaphors of uncertainty.

Adelaide described practice as inherently 'messy', drawing on Schön's notion of the 'swampy lowlands':

Life is messy, and practice is messy ... it's not about having all the answers.

Edward situated this uncertainty within his teaching practice, describing a deliberate move away from rigid reliance on codes of practice:

Stepping outside the teaching plan and my sort of Holy Grail [codes of practice] ... is to encourage these guys to have the confidence to deal with grey.

Participants described drawing on professional experience to make judgements about proportionality, necessity, and impact. Edward reflected on decision-making across policing, regulatory, and parole work:

First of all, legality and then proportionality and necessity and sometimes ... whether there's any seen or unseen collateral intrusion.

These situated narratives were frequently brought into the classroom to expose students to the realities of ethical decision-making without the risks associated with real-world consequences. Adelaide described this as central to ensuring students were 'fit for practice', noting that practice-based teaching enhanced both student confidence and staff legitimacy.

Participants also distinguished between compliance with professional frameworks and enacted professionalism. Lara captured this distinction succinctly:

The difference between professionalising youth and community work through registration, and professionalism.

### *Theme 3: Normative social influence*

Participants described how institutional norms shaped ethical behaviour, particularly early in professional careers. Edward situated this within organisational socialisation, noting how prolonged exposure could erode objectivity:

You will retain a degree of objectivity, but that will diminish over time because you start to become part of the system.

Despite this, participants maintained that institutional influence did not fundamentally alter personal moral beliefs. Instead, individuals described negotiating tensions between personal values and organisational expectations. Adelaide articulated this through a narrative grounded in compassion-based practice:

Compassion isn't cool if it doesn't make sense to yourself ... I would hope that I try and live my values and therefore walk the walk.

Within higher education, participants framed teaching as a counterbalance to normative pressure, supporting students to justify ethical decisions even when these conflicted with dominant expectations.

#### *Theme 4: Higher education as moral education*

Participants consistently situated higher education as a critical space for moral education, particularly in applied disciplines. Andrew described the importance of connecting theory to action:

It's important that we're not just teaching the theory ... but the reality of how that theory translates to action or policy.

Teaching practices included case studies and explicit engagement with ethical theory. Raynard described asking students to analyse ethical frameworks embedded in professional codes and identify points of conflict. Edward described using moral dilemmas with police students, explicitly separating personal responses from professional role expectations.

Participants also described student discomfort with ambiguity. Raynard noted a perceived shift towards instrumental approaches to ethics:

There's almost like this desire for an answer sheet kind of approach. Just tell me what to do.

*Theme 5: Safe spaces and unconscious bias*

Participants described safe spaces as essential for discussing morality and bias, while acknowledging that such spaces were often uncomfortable. Adelaide situated this within her classroom leadership role:

Using positional authority ... to allow people to feel valued and heard ... creating a community of learning.

Discomfort was described as productive when managed carefully:

If everything's nice and polite, it's not doing the job ... learn to live with the discomfort a little bit.

Unconscious bias was described as particularly challenging. Lara emphasised its universality:

We've all got unconscious bias ... it's about accepting that.

Adelaide described students' realisation of their own judgement as 'incredibly unsettling', highlighting the emotional dimension of moral learning. Raynard situated bias within reflective practice, describing reflexivity as examining 'why you are inclining yourself towards one thing and away from another'.

*Theme 6: Non-clinical supervision in higher education*

Participants situated their desire for supervision within prior professional contexts where clinical supervision was routine. Lara described seeking private supervision after moving into higher education:

I can't function as a purposeful practitioner without that moral, ethical sounding base.

Supervision was described as essential for managing secondary trauma arising from student placements. Participants proposed peer supervision models

within universities, drawing parallels with professional practice. Adelaide described organisational resistance to removing such structures, noting how practitioners 'saw the value' once supervision was embedded.

Barriers included workload pressures and lack of appropriate models. Despite this, participants viewed supervision as beneficial for staff wellbeing, ethical reflection, and reinforcing professional identity.

### *Discussion of findings and implications for practice*

#### *Research questions*

Our first research question: 'What relevance does moral philosophy have within the contemporary education of students within community-facing fields?' has been answered within the data gathered. Specifically, participants reported that moral philosophy was a key component of their teaching and was effective when applied to specific dilemmas, contexts, or professional boundaries. However, an important limitation identified was a lack of literature applying moral philosophy and theory to specific professions.

Our second research question: 'What information to increase awareness of unconscious bias are academic staff within community-facing fields using with their student practitioners in the classroom?' has also been answered within the data gathered. First, our participants indicated that this was an important factor within their teaching and that one important issue that needs to be overcome within those sessions is the discomfort felt when confronted with the notion that all humans have their own unconscious biases and that it is important to bring this into the light and address them. Predominantly, participants mentioned addressing unconscious biases in sessions where learners were supported to feel both valued and safe to be fallible. This process was deemed to be an important part of helping students develop into well-rounded professionals.

Our participants provided information which provided insights into moral and ethical conduct and training beyond our research questions.

*Two-step moral decisions*

Our thematic analysis suggests that participants operate within a two-step process when making moral decisions in practice and that they support students to adopt a similar process. In the first step, they show deference to deontology and professional boundaries. They first ask themselves what courses of action are available and appropriate within the realms of the professional boundaries outlined by the professional standards, codes of practice and legislation relevant to their area of practice.

[you ask yourself] what's the right thing to do? And if you've got a legal framework, it makes it easier because you know whether you can or you can't. (Edward)

This is a key consideration both for the professionals in practice and within their classrooms. The second step relates to the more nuanced consideration of what is morally allowable within the individual's personal ontology and what is appropriate in the complex morally grey that is the reality of practice.

because we (the university) would teach professionally endorsed courses, there's a set of ... quality standards that come from ETS (Education Training Standards Wales) that our program, adheres to. So, it links back to youth and community work ... and this is about bringing it in at the various levels to ensure that students get a grasp of it and can put it into their practice. So, ultimately, youth and community work is a values-based profession, and ... it's got an ethical framework, there's an ethical approach. (Lara)

I would have some students who have a very strong faith. I have other students who have no faith, don't be afraid of those tensions. I know it sounds like a contradiction but enjoy the tensions. Play with the tensions because that's where the knowledge is. That's where the gift is. (Adelaide)

For the professionals, their personal ontology grew from their experience, which in turn helped to formulate their identities as individuals. This, in turn, enabled them to effectively consider moral actions in practice when situations did not have obvious solutions within their professional boundaries.

Life is messy, and practice is messy. You know swampy lowlands; it's not about having all the answers. (Adelaide)

I think sometimes stepping outside the teaching plan and my sort of Holy Grail (codes of practice), really if I'm honest, is to encourage these guys to have the confidence to deal with grey, to deal with black and white is easy. (Edward)

We are ensuring that students are fit for practice as best as best we can, and all aspects of our teaching really need to be related to practice, and I think it gives students confidence and gives staff legitimacy. (Adelaide)

This two-step process is reflected in other areas of research such as in the late Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman's seminal work on the behavioural economics of heuristics and biases (Kahneman, 2012). In this work, Kahneman discusses the role of system one and system two type decision-making. System one processes are rapid and often automatic responses that require little effort on the part of the individual, whereas system two processes are more measured and involve more consideration to arrive at a decision. This similarity should come as little surprise when considered in context. We have shown how the professional boundaries, that encompass the frameworks that professionals rely on to make decisions, are typically the scaffolding that is used when faced with a professional challenge. This initial *system one* type of deference and dependence on the professional boundaries to set the guidelines and potential scope for a decision are what delineates each respective professional role. However, through continued professional experience and when these decisions may challenge the professionals' personal ontologies, a more cognitively complex system two type approach can be witnessed taking place. This consideration highlights the necessity for a professional to consider the nuances and potentially *swampy lowlands* of a situation that may not fit perfectly within the professional boundaries.

### *Personal and professional identity*

As mentioned previously, professional identity was a key aspect of the moral decision-making process. One important theme that we drew from our data was the way in which professional identities were built for our participants. Despite being academics, they first viewed themselves according to their previous professional roles. Being an educator was an adjunct to their professional identities.

I'm a youth worker first, I'm not a manager, I'm a lecturer second and when I was a PD [programme director], I was a PD third. (Adelaide)

Their professional role outside of academia was intrinsically linked to their personal identities and their subjective ontological view of the world. Our data indicated that there was a cyclical relationship between the profession shaping a participant's identity, their identity being driven by personal values, which in turn, impacted how the professionals operated within their professions. We therefore understood that professional boundaries are frameworks that scaffold the individual curating their own identity as a professional. We have in some ways replicated previous findings where researchers have demonstrated that professional identities are a key part of the way in which professionals conceptualize themselves (E.g. Ashforth et al., 2008). However, it is interesting that in our findings, these participants conceptualised themselves not as educators, their current role, but as the professions they had prior to joining academia. When people define themselves in relation to their profession, they will consider aspects such as their personal beliefs, values, and attributes, as well as their motivations and experiences within their profession (Schein, 1978), the type of work that they do and any advanced training or qualifications needed (Pratt et al., 2006). Our participants define themselves according to their beliefs and their previous professional experiences and qualifications, but their current role was not present or was subordinate to their profession. This is perhaps because of the focus of their teaching on their previous practice, or perhaps because of the ways in which they are seen by their students.

Research indicates that professional identities can be informed by the perceptions of others (Roberts et al., 2005). Given the importance of professional identity in how individuals give meaning to themselves and the impact it can have on experiences of work (Siebert and Siebert, 2005), higher education institutions should consider the various ways that formative experiences in the classroom and placement settings will help learners to build their professional identities. Education institutions should consider the importance of both the professional boundaries and the support needed for learners to build their professional identities through learning and later experience.

#### *Normative social influence*

Our third key finding indicated that institutions to which our professionals belonged might, at times, exert normative social influence over individuals, thus affecting their decision-making processes. Participants indicated that, early in their careers, they

were more likely to bend when confronted with organisational pressures and people in positions of power. However, with experience, participants explained, came a greater confidence to challenge morally and ethically questionable behaviours.

I think it's about being comfortable in your own skin and it's about knowing it's about being comfortable with the possibility of being isolated and saying 'well, actually, this is why I did what I did' ... this this could be an unconscious bias. I think some of this comes with age and experience. (Lara)

Within policing contexts, this normative effect has been reported to impact the decisions that people make when subjected to organisational pressures from other police officers (Miller and Rayner, 2012). It was suggested that this was especially prominent where individuals used *isolation* as a method to exclude people from group activities as a form of normative punishment, or as Miller and Rayner labelled it: institutional bullying. Within our participants, the normative influence of the organisations was not substantial enough to change the professionals' personal beliefs, but they became part of a system that might put others under pressure, and at times, behaviours in opposition to personal ontologies were born from a wish to belong to their institutions. Additionally, it was felt that students in HE classrooms would often defer to the lecturers as professionals, because of their personal experiences with education and other formal services in their formative years in school and the wider community.

you will retain a degree of objectivity, but that will diminish over time because you will start to become not institutionalized, but you'll start to become part of the system. (Edward)

I always say that actually I want an extra year with students because I feel like we need to decondition them because they come in ... but especially the younger ones who come up through formal education route. Slightly different for some of our students or maybe been excluded from formal education that they come in de-politicized, or very conformist. (Adelaide)

We as staff are very much minded as teachers or lecturers or as experts so there's a lot of deferral to us. (Adelaide)

Gibson's (2019) reconceptualisation of obedience and social influence provides a useful theoretical lens through which to interpret the normative pressures described by participants in this study. Traditional social psychological accounts of social influence, heavily shaped by Milgram's (1963) obedience experiments, have tended to conceptualise obedience as a response to explicit commands issued by an authority

figure. Within this framework, moral or behavioural compliance is understood as something elicited through direct instruction or coercion. However, as Gibson argues, this definition is overly narrow and fails to account for the more diffuse and routine ways in which authority operates within contemporary institutions.

Gibson (2019) demonstrates that in many contexts individuals comply with authoritative systems in the absence of direct orders. He proposes that obedience is more accurately understood as submission to the implicit requirements of an authoritative system, a process sustained through what he terms authoritative expectation. In such contexts, individuals act not because they are told to do so, but because they anticipate what is expected of them given their role, the norms of the institution, and the legitimacy of the authority involved. Authority, therefore, is embedded within professional roles, organisational cultures, and institutional frameworks, rather than residing solely in overt acts of command.

This conceptualisation closely aligns with our findings. Participants rarely described ethical tension as arising from being explicitly instructed to act against their values. Instead, they described situations in which professional boundaries were unclear, discretion was required, or organisational norms implicitly shaped what was considered acceptable practice. In these circumstances, participants noted that individuals, particularly those earlier in their careers, might act in ways that conflicted with their personal moral ontology in order to conform, belong, or avoid isolation. This reflects Gibson's argument that authoritative expectation exerts influence precisely because it is implicit and often unarticulated.

Importantly, our participants' accounts suggest that authoritative expectation operates most strongly where professional frameworks are perceived as fixed, unquestionable, or procedurally dominant. For example, deference to professional standards and legislation functioned as an initial moral anchor, shaping what actions were perceived as legitimate before any explicit ethical deliberation took place. In Gibson's terms, this represents obedience without orders: professionals internalise institutional authority to such an extent that compliance becomes automatic and self-regulating rather than enforced.

At the same time, participants emphasised that higher education classrooms can function as sites where authoritative expectations are surfaced and critically examined. By encouraging students to interrogate professional norms, reflect on unconscious bias, and justify ethical decisions, educators actively disrupt the taken-for-granted authority of institutions. This pedagogical approach directly

counters the risks identified by Gibson; whereby unexamined authoritative expectation may lead to ethically problematic action without conscious intent.

Gibson's framework does not merely parallel our findings but helps to explain how and why normative social influence operates within professional education and practice. It highlights the importance of moral education that goes beyond rule-following, enabling students and practitioners to recognise when they are responding to implicit expectations rather than explicit ethical reasoning. In doing so, it reinforces our argument that higher education has a critical role in fostering reflective autonomy and ethical resistance, particularly in community-facing professions where moral ambiguity and institutional pressure frequently intersect.

Alternatively, this phenomenon can be examined through the lenses of pedagogical strategy and narrative coherence. Pedagogical strategy refers to the deliberate methods educators employ to facilitate learning, while narrative coherence concerns the logical organisation and connection of ideas that help students construct a meaningful and comprehensible learning experience.

Participants emphasis on their former professional identities may also reflect deliberate pedagogical strategies rather than fixed or unresolved identity commitments. Drawing on lived professional experience allows educators to enhance the credibility, relevance, and applied nature of their teaching, an approach that continues to be recognised as central to effective professional education (Trede, Macklin and Bridges, 2012; van der Rijst et al., 2019). From this perspective, the articulation of practitioner identity functions as a pedagogical resource, signalling authenticity and practice relevance to students and aligning with expectations of 'fitness for practice', rather than indicating resistance to academic identity or incomplete professional transition.

In addition, it is important to recognise the narrative and interpretive nature of qualitative accounts. Identity talk in interviews often reflects retrospective sense-making, whereby participants draw on salient, formative, or emotionally meaningful experiences to construct coherent professional narratives (Ashforth et al., 2008). Prior professional roles may therefore be foregrounded because they provide accessible and socially recognisable explanatory anchors for describing one's professional self, rather than because these identities necessarily dominate participants' everyday academic practice. Recent work on academic and professional identity formation suggests that such narratives are fluid,

context-dependent, and responsive to audience and institutional setting, rather than stable indicators of underlying identity hierarchy (Kreber, 2013; Whitchurch, 2018).

when we're teaching students, particularly in disciplines that have a lot of applied elements to them, that it's important that we're not just teaching the theory of things, but the reality of ... how that theory translates to action or to policy. (Andrew)

Our participants therefore emphasised the role of the classroom in giving students the confidence to act autonomously, and a sense of identity that will allow them to resist potential pressures. Students should be aware that the correct, moral, and ethical choice, may not always be the popular one. The role of the educator is therefore an important one, they have normative and informational social influence, and educational experiences are key to the formative perspectives that will either challenge or affirm students' beliefs.

#### *Higher education as a vehicle for moral education*

The importance of higher education as a vehicle for moral education was a key aspect of our participants' responses. Our findings demonstrate that moral education within contemporary teaching practices should involve: the contextualisation of the previous issues around professional identity; the role of the professional; the contextualisation and application of professional boundaries; and the morally grey situations that occur when theory meets practice.

We'll talk about what ethics are and I'll give them case studies. We'll talk about different schools of ethics. I look at ethical frameworks that relate to the profession and I'll ask them to look at what schools of ethics do they see embedded in ethical frameworks and where might those clash. (Raynard)

because of my specific role in teaching police officers, one of the first sort of exercises we do with them is to pose them a moral dilemma. But we asked them to answer it as individuals, not as how they think a police officer should answer it. (Edward)

You've got to learn how to think ethically, but what I've seen is a big change in the will to want to think ethically to work it out. There there's almost like this desire for like an answer sheet kind of approach. Just tell me what to do. (Raynard)

Higher education can therefore utilise the scaffolds of professional boundaries to inform real-world context. This construction of knowledge adds nuance, theory

and real-world practice to rigid frameworks and legislation allowing student practitioners to explore different perspectives with the support and guidance of an experienced practitioner. Examples of practice from our participants included case study analysis, personal introspection, discussion of moral dilemmas, and immersive roleplay scenarios. These provided a deep understanding of ethics and morality and despite not covering every possible scenario that might arise in context, dilemmas, case studies and scenarios facilitate critical consideration of possible responses and their repercussions that prepare students for unknowable future situations. A key barrier to the above is the lack of nuanced literature applying general moral theory to specific professional contexts.

Lack of nuanced literature relating to delivering moral education in the classroom, there are some key texts you know, but it's something that's been noted, you know across youth and community work in Wales. (Lara)

Wong (2020) further supports higher education as a vehicle to deliver moral education. In their study on undergraduate perceptions of learning moral philosophy at university, they concluded that students had a keen desire in the subject area. Wong demonstrated how participants viewed moral philosophy as a lifelong learning process, which meant that it should also be a fundamental aspect of their university learning, requiring a safe space that enabled students to consider their own practices for the *betterment* of their social and personal lives. Likewise, our participants highlighted a need for safe spaces to discuss morality, ethics, and unconscious bias.

#### *Safe spaces to discuss ethics and morality*

Graham (2021, p. 84) defines safe spaces as being spaces where 'everyone feels comfortable expressing themselves and participating fully, without fear of attack, ridicule, or denial of experience'. Similarly, within the context of our study, we consider safe spaces to be contexts where students or staff can discuss their thoughts without fear of judgement but where preconceptions and biases can be challenged. Our participants felt that care needed to be taken when creating such spaces for learners as there is the potential for staff to have normative and informational social influence over students.

Clearly I have a position and I have positional authority and influence but using that to allow people to feel valued and heard and use that to tip the power balance of power to shape power in terms of democratic leadership, in terms of shared power and co-creation and It's a concept of creating a community of learning... (Adelaide)

it's not going to be pretty and it's going to be messy, It's going to be challenging ... if everything's nice and polite, it's not doing the job cause life isn't nice and polite. So, it's like, learn to live with the discomfort a little bit. But also know and protect your own limit. (Adelaide)

There's still a degree of hierarchy, and there's still a degree of the performative. There is a degree of groupthink and trying to get them to have the confidence to be able to speak truth to power or perceived power. Not an adversarial way, but in a just ask the question kind of way. (Edward)

Graham proposes two areas of debate should be acknowledged when attempting to create safe spaces in the higher education classroom. On one side of the debate, are those that agree with the contexts of safe spaces that have been discussed already. These are spaces that allow students to be vulnerable, fallible, and free to be themselves without fear of reprisal or ridicule. Our participants agreed that these should be the basics of what a safe space should aim to achieve but also felt that true efficacious safe spaces for a university classroom should also cultivate a student's resilience to feel uncomfortable, providing this discomfort was not malicious or targeted.

We've all got unconscious bias, we are all prejudiced, we're humans, we're fallible, and it's about accepting that becoming comfortable with it, which can be really difficult. (Lara)

Unconscious bias and the impact this has on professional judgment, in practice ... that we incline ourselves towards things, but we have to kind of ... we talk a lot about ... reflective practices. Where I talk about reflective practice space as a space for reflexivity and examining why are you inclining yourself towards one thing and away from another? Why? What is that? ... And examining your own kind of epistemological bases for decision making. (Reynard)

This brings us to the other side of what Graham proposes to be heatedly debated. If we only create spaces where students feel absolutely comfortable at all times, which is the opposite of what our participants have suggested is important to promote effective participation and development in students, then what that does is risk censoring university teachers from expressing ideas and concepts that may threaten another person's sense of wellbeing and comfort.

Our participants felt that as teachers they should facilitate a safe space, by fostering an environment of mutual respect, support, and a sense of feeling valued, but also where students may be challenged to see discomfort as a supported learning opportunity born out of this mutual respect. This should also extend to the teachers and the content delivered in the classroom. To effectively reduce the risk of academic censorship as described by Graham, both the teachers and students should participate in the co-construction of these safe spaces and must be prepared for the challenges that will arise when discussing biases, morality and ethics.

We've all got unconscious bias, we are all prejudiced, we're humans, we're fallible, and it's about accepting that becoming comfortable with it, which can be really difficult. (Lara)

I think it's about Time and recognizing that actually that journey can be incredibly unsettling. Because people with the best and purest of intention, come to university and believe that it is possible to be non-judgmental and at some point, they will realize it's not and that they are judgmental, and they will have made Judgements, Stereotypes, Assumptions and whether that's around protected characteristics or other factors. (Adelaide)

Because if people feel judged. If people feel bad or shamed. If people feel flawed, often walls go up, and polarization, defensiveness happens, and they don't move forward. How do we work with that? By creating the conditions that allow people to feel scared, uncertain, fallible, and flawed – but still feel valued and appreciated and whole. (Adelaide)

The discomfort can help to shape resilience and knowledge, providing it is done with compassion and integrity and is never purposefully malicious. That said, whenever programme-specific staff are running sessions on these topics, there will invariably be issues of perceived power and the potential for performative expression from the learners. The need for the discussion of morality and ethics amongst academics and the issues relating to power when these conversations are instigated by management mirror the issues outlined for learners. The issue of power is a challenge that may be difficult to address within current university structures and may call for something more radical to support these practices while providing the perception of safety and structured support both in the classroom and outside of it. Tran (2015) discusses the issues surrounding power imbalances, which they describe as often fluctuating, highlighting that whilst there is a need for clearly defined roles between the lecturers and students, higher education staff should be conscious that these roles are changing and suggests that this is due to the increasing vocality of students in the classroom. This could potentially

complicate the roles within the classroom and lead to role reversals and complications where the professional boundaries associated with being a student practitioner, or a member of staff, lead to further tensions that can impact the wellbeing of either party.

### *Modelling supervision in higher education*

One potentially radical solution to the issues outlined above is the introduction of non-clinical supervision in higher education. In their professional practice roles, clinical supervision of staff was the norm for our participants and some disclosed seeking supervision privately to support them in their roles within the university when supporting learners with the complex issues that arise in placements.

one of the things I highlight a lot in my teaching is the importance of clinical supervision in supporting ethical judgments and practice. (Raynard)

You know the starting foundation and Level 4 and run through to level 6 and beyond, you know, so you. If you can give students and you can provide students with frameworks with, with something tangible to hook this on and then give them examples and then give them an opportunity to go out and do that in practice and then and then and it's closing that loop, isn't it? (Lara)

Supervision may therefore create the safe spaces necessary to fully explore these moral and ethical issues. They did not view the absence of supervision as a fault of universities but suggested that there was an opportunity to improve practice for academics and model this important aspect of practice with learners, providing learning opportunities concerning both morality and ethics as well as a key aspect of their future professional roles.

is that not an opportunity to go forward to set up a peer supervision group ... I know we have like, ethics research groups and stuff, but that's for specific things. Is there an opportunity to bring together people within the university staff to set up some type of peer supervisory group where we can have these bigger questions which will further inform our practice in the same way that we are expecting students to do on the outside? (Lara)

Additionally, the participants felt that this would positively impact the mental health of staff and provide a place to discuss challenges they could not discuss elsewhere.

it's something that I've actually got externally privately because I can't function as a purposeful practitioner ... without that moral, ethical sounding base ... it's about me needing that transference of awareness ... particularly when we've got students in really difficult placements because you get the trauma and the secondary trauma and then they're coming back and they're discussing it and they're exploring it and ... you've got the team and ... the team is really supportive in terms of team briefs and debriefs, but we are still when we have students that are out in placement, we still have that link to placement unlike other courses that don't have placements. (Lara)

by the time I was moving on and shortly after I left, [the organisation] tried to stop having these peer mentoring sessions and then they were up in arms because they were so wedded to this process of constructive challenge. They saw the value. (Adelaide)

However, they identified potential barriers in terms of workload, particularly in the current higher education climate, where resources at many institutions are limited, and in terms of models that might be appropriate for this setting.

[the challenge] ... again this comes down to time and ability to take these ideas forwards. And the fact that, you know people's working hours are full and the fact that, you know there's a recruitment freeze on. How do you make this real and how do you take it forward, we know the problems, how do we solve it? (Lara)

We, therefore, suggest that as there is a need for a version of clinical supervision that is suitable for staff and students within these community-facing degrees, future research should examine the form such supervision could take and its feasibility within the higher education landscape. The next stage of our research involves co-constructing such models of supervision with colleagues who work on relevant programmes. Co-construction is an important facet of the building of practices that with facilitate social interactions and in this case will involve the joint creation of a specific type of activity (Jacoby and Ochs, 1995). In the future, we will look to pilot such models with relevant populations to gauge their efficacy in supporting staff and students in their journeys through the swampy lowlands of ethical and moral conduct.

The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2021) states that there is no one agreed definition of clinical supervision. It is a process of professional learning and development where staff reflect on their own practice and knowledge through support from another more senior and experienced professional within that field. There are dozens of models of supervision (Bernard and Goodyear, 2004) but not all are bedded in empirical evidence. There are several reviews which have

attempted to distil research into supervision within different caring professions into the fundamental aspects of supervision which have sound empirical support (see Watkins, 2019 for a review of review articles in this field). Though our participants have suggested that supervision is a viable path forward, research suggests that many models of supervision are lacking in empirical support (Watkins, 2019). It is therefore of utmost importance that any suggested models of supervision within the higher education context are researched so that we gain an empirically evidenced model of supervision.

### **Limitations**

One important limitation of this research is that the scope was limited to universities in South Wales. Further exploration is required to see whether these opinions are mirrored across the UK and elsewhere in the world. In Wales, the Welsh government (the Senedd) is devolved, this has implications for policy relating to the fields that these practitioners may have worked in and for the contexts that graduates are likely to go to. This is true where each UK nation has different levels of devolved responsibility for policies relating to education, health, and social welfare (see e.g. NSPCC, 2024) which means that there are likely to be differences in practices and the application of policies across the different national contexts.

Our participants were specifically chosen from higher education institutions, this therefore prevents the generalisation of our findings to other educational contexts and to other facets of these professions, for example, current police officers working in Wales, or other types of educational institutions outside of higher education contexts.

Within this research, we have discussed unconscious bias. There is an argument that the elevation of academic voices, often psychologists, in terms of unconscious bias training is, in and of itself, a form of bias (Jackson, 2018). This is in part due to the focus on academic research as evidence. Given that biases can prevent disadvantaged groups from accessing higher education, and a large amount of psychological research is based on students within these settings, diverse voices may not be included within academic research (Henrich et al., 2010). Disadvantaged groups may also be reluctant to involve themselves with academic research, given the historically oppressive ways it has been used (Tinsley, 2022). Diverse voices

may not be included in the building of the educational materials themselves. This is, in part, because academics tend to be the ones building these materials, and historical systematic oppression has prevented proportional representation of oppressed groups within higher education settings (Advance HE, 2022). This research, though it has sought to understand the exploration and confrontation of unconscious bias, has failed to address the above limitations. However, we have not attempted to provide a specific programme designed to overcome unconscious bias, nor have we attempted to describe the experiences of marginalised groups within our research. Future research in the area of unconscious bias should seek to elevate marginalised voices within their participant groups and ensure that individuals from marginalised groups are involved and listened to at every stage.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research illustrates the crucial role higher education plays in promoting moral education amongst students preparing for community-facing roles, such as policing and youth and community services.

The findings of our research underscore the significance of integrating ethical training into academic programmes in higher education institutions, providing safe spaces for discussing complex ethical issues, and utilising real-world examples to prepare students effectively by contextualising the professional role. Moreover, the study illustrates the interconnectedness between personal ontologies and professional boundaries, emphasising the continued need for ongoing reflection and dialogue within educational settings that moral education within the classroom provides.

The practical implications of this research highlight the importance of universities in understanding and shaping ongoing student and practitioner perceptions of professional identity in alignment with moral, ethical, and professional boundaries. Furthermore, it emphasises the role of moral and ethical education in empowering students to challenge normative social influences upon entering the workforce. The identified need for safe spaces for both staff and students to engage in ethical discussions underscores the importance of fostering an open and supportive learning environment to efficaciously support student practitioners and prepare them for future roles.

Additionally, the suggestion of developing a model of supervision that is appropriate for higher education settings offers a promising approach to supporting both staff and students in navigating ethical challenges, and opportunities for universities to support staff and student wellbeing more effectively. Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature by giving emphasis to the significance of moral and ethical training within higher education classrooms and advocating for the establishment of supportive frameworks to facilitate ethical development among future community professionals.

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