

Article

Ethical Competence in Master's Degrees: Definition and Shaping Factors

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Abstract: The inclusion of ethical competence in the training of master's degree students remains a challenge. It has important links to the professionalization process, but unevenness has been found in its development and implementation, and this appears to generate shortcomings in training processes. The aim of this study is to understand the meaning of ethical competence and to identify factors that facilitate its inclusion in master's degree programs. A multicentre phenomenological study was carried out at universities in Spain and Argentina. Students and faculty from ten master's degree programs in different subjects participated. Three broad overall categories emerged from our analysis: competencies related to the professional profile; factors in the professionalizing process; and training in ethical competence. These categories suggest that ethical competence is a core rather than an added value for any professional, thereby stressing the need to address its pedagogical importance in education.

Keywords: ethical competence; master's degrees; higher education; teacher education; students; learning approaches



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1. Introduction

This article presents the results of a project titled “Ethical competence in master's degrees: meanings, experiences and practices for the detection of training needs (2020PID-UB/014/REDICE20/2720)”, conducted by the consolidated innovation group INTERMAS-TER (GINDOC-UB/127) hosted by the University of Barcelona (UB), with the participation of students and lecturers from different master's degrees at three universities. While the majority of participants were from the UB, others from the University of Lleida Sant Joan de Déu Campus (affiliated to the UB) and Favaloro University (Argentina) also took part.

Ethical competence is defined as that shown by morally mature people when they manifest a combination of knowledge, procedures and attitudes in a range of situations, taking ethical factors into account and thereby giving their professional practice a social and moral meaning that goes beyond the merely instrumental. Thus, ethical competence aspires to a constructive, dialogical approach in which subjects, as actors, are the protagonists of their own ethical learning in the cognitive, affective, volitional and behavioral spheres, at the same time being nourished by experiences and relationships making up the foundations of their learning. Ethically competent people are capable of setting aside exclusively individualistic approaches, choosing instead a balance of independence and the quest for the common good; they have personal judgment and confidence while at the same time being flexible, empathetic and open to dialogue. They accept different points of view, value the importance of relationships, show awareness, and are willing and able to belong to and engage in groups and communities, share projects, work in teams, and commit themselves

to and take responsibility for both individual and common objectives [1–3]. Clearly, then, such professionals know the ethical code of their profession (if it exists), while at the same time recognizing that ethical action must go beyond merely following the rules [4].

Ethical competencies invoke relationships with oneself, others, the community and society as a whole, and they are always present in the academic world due to their cross-curricular nature and the fact that they are both personal and interpersonal [1,5]. In fact, within an instrumental classification of competencies, ethics are those that link all the other competencies both to society and to the good of the community [6]. There is general consensus in considering ethics as a core element of professional practice [7,8], since the latter embraces cognitive factors, skills, and moral aspects. Thus, professional competencies consist of an integrated set of different forms of knowledge encompassing both subject-matter knowledge, skills (knowledge of how to do things) and attitudes and values involving the knowledge of how to act and why. All of these different facets of knowledge can be learned and developed in university education, and are directly related to ethical factors and, therefore, to the ethical competencies we are concerned with here [2,8].

The Bologna Plan initiated a competency-based approach to university education [9,10] that encompasses cognitive, technical, ethical, moral and citizenship competencies [11,12]. From this perspective, it is argued that the university's goal is to form future professionals through quality education that enables them to understand their current situation, contextualize problems and take action in increasingly complex realities. We are in agreement with Escámez and Morales when they argue that competencies in education have three aspects: as know-how, as skills and as the link between the first two, through which we can transform the person's potential into acts and behaviours. These authors also affirm that competencies are complex learning processes in which the importance of the personality and the context and its overall scope are essential features to take into account [13].

Clearly, most universities acknowledge the importance of educating their students in ethical competencies, since the Bologna framework establishes this as a requirement. However, they often do so from a reductionist point of view, focusing only on professional ethics, if an ethical code for the field exists, and embracing the topic as a curriculum subject, but not approached as a "soft" or cross-curricular competence throughout the degree program [10,11,13].

Although the importance of this is undeniable, our study shows that it would also be valuable to address experiences, social practices and the associated activities from a broader ethical point of view [5,13,14]. For this reason, we are committed to a form of ethical education that encompasses topics, methodologies and relevant activity designs from an ethical perspective that involves a particular approach, form of analysis, and way of responding to and handling problems that are all freighted with ethical elements. Our findings concur with previous research highlighting the importance of posing real-life dilemmas to students within an approach inspired by Kohlberg's just community [15], and also with other studies underscoring that both teachers and students see ethical competencies as one of the main traits of a good professional [2]. We fully share this idea, and we argue that an important goal of quality university education is to combine the purely technical informative and procedural aspect with the ethical one, designing and delivering learning situations that can promote comprehensive personal and professional growth. In this way, ethical learning will have an impact on the construction of the self, on socio-moral reflection and on our shared lives [3]. Kohlberg emphasized the development of moral reasoning (1992), while Lickona (1992) indicated the need to attend not only to the cognitive sphere but also to the affective and contextual spheres in order to achieve an overarching, all-inclusive perspective on moral development. The construction of a rational, autonomous moral personality based on ethical learning thus takes into account the cognitive, affective and volitional spheres in order to influence moral identity and the construction of the self in the development of socio-moral reflection and the commitment to improving our lives with others [3,16].

In our view it would be valuable for contemporary universities to return to the functions of a basic, comprehensive humanistic education that can create the conditions for learning ethical competencies that would enable students to identify, analyse, interpret and respond to value-laden situations from an exhaustive overall perspective [17]. Contemporary social and professional challenges, combined with the technologization of society, make it desirable to move away from “technological super-training” to a more human, critical, respectful and flexible form of education, capable of responding to these challenges from the theoretical, technical and ethical perspectives. In short, the principles and objectives of the university would ideally embrace the vision of a student who is a citizen and professional with mind, body and heart [1,18].

For all these reasons, university teachers are not seen as mere conveyors of knowledge, much less at the master’s degree level. Lecturers and educators represent models that can enhance or hinder the development of the aforementioned areas. In fact, there are diverse ways in which ethical competencies can be developed and in which the teacher’s influence can be perceived [19]. Relational, introspective and deliberative practices are clearly educational opportunities for the university student, as a person, as a professional and as a citizen. This is because ethical competence involves developing personal skills enabling students to achieve a solid and coherent construction of the personality with greater autonomy and responsibility for their own performance in morally significant issues [20]. It is this perspective—vital for living in our uncertain, constantly changing society full of relativistic and dogmatic approaches, and bearing in mind the pressing need to build collective projects in which diversity is accounted for in the achievement of common goals—that frames the purpose of the study presented here.

Achieving this involves, amongst other things, analysing the extent to which teachers are aware of what ethical competencies mean and represent, and enquiring into whether they include them intentionally and systematically in their approaches, in order to identify possible training needs.

To this end, two objectives were set for this study: (a) to understand in depth the meaning of ethical competence from the perspective of students and teachers and to define the elements making up this competence for both groups; and (b) to analyse the factors that facilitate and hinder the development of ethical competence among master’s degree students and to determine what impact this has on the professionalizing process.

2. Materials and Methods

Within a constructivist paradigm, the study adopted a hermeneutic-interpretative phenomenological approach. This methodology enabled us to extract principles, ideas and meanings from individual subjective accounts, which were then compared and contrasted with those of other participants, determining common features that allowed us to delineate general concepts of ethical competence on master’s degrees [21].

The study was conducted during the 2020–2021 academic year with students and teachers of the following master’s degrees: master’s degree in Law, master’s degree in Educational Psychology, master’s degree in Education, transversal modules of four research master’s degrees at the Faculty of Education, and master’s degree in Lifelong Hospital Pedagogy at the University of Barcelona (UB); master’s degree in Advanced Studies on Social Exclusion at the UB-affiliated San Juan de Dios Campus; and master’s degree in Neurosciences at the University of Favoloro.

The criteria of purposive, theoretical quota sampling [22] were adopted, with the sample comprising current students, graduates (acting professionals), teachers and practice tutors of both sexes from the training courses analysed.

Three student focus groups and three faculty focus groups were conducted using the Microsoft Teams platform, which allowed participants to exchange their experiences in relation to the study and to identify similarities, differences and discrepancies [23].

The focus groups ranged from seven to ten participants. Two groups were made up of students from various master’s degrees in the social and educational fields; two others

comprised teachers from the same courses; and lastly, there was one group of students and one group of teachers from the master's degree in Law. A total of 57 people participated.

A working script was drawn up for all the focus groups, centering on three principles: the concept of the good professional; factors relating to ethical competence; and education in that competence. The focus groups were conducted by two or three researchers, one of whom played the role of facilitator during the dialogue while a second performed non-participant observation, taking notes on the different contributions and the elements of non-verbal communication that could be observed. The lead researcher was present in all groups, and sought to expand the students' and teachers' narratives by means of specific questions complementing the information they provided, with particular reference to the main principles mentioned above. The focus groups were recorded, with written informed consent given and verbally ratified before each recording began.

The content of the discussion groups (DG) was transcribed verbatim for subsequent scrutiny. This was carried out in two stages: firstly, individual analysis by each of the researchers present identified the descriptive codes; and secondly, the interpretative codes were determined, always following an inductive coding technique [24]. To ensure correct coding, all the researchers took an eight-hour training program titled "Ethics applied to the analysis of ethical competence among master's degree students", which qualified them for the object of study.

Coding was carried out according to the questions and main topics of the questionnaire script, followed by pair triangulation. Two researchers per group participated in this process. In each case, the *in vivo* code was determined, represented by a label combining letters and numbers composed of the number of the discussion group, specifying whether the participant was a student (E) or faculty member (P) (DG1E, DG2E, DG3E, DG4P, DG5P and DG6P), plus the initials of the first and last name, and the minute of the DG.

The final review and unified classification of the codes and categories were carried out by three of the team members with expertise in ethical competence (also responsible for the unified classification of the prior analyses and for drafting the findings), and two other members with expertise in the construction of the instrument. To achieve the objectives with maximum rigor, the COREQ criteria [25] and the criteria for trustworthiness created by Lincoln and Guba [26] were applied.

It should be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic limited face-to-face attendance in the study. To overcome this, it was decided to use online tools for data collection, accepting the limitations of this approach, but also thereby ensuring the participation of all the students and teachers invited.

Lastly, the study was approved by the ethical committee of the Sant Joan de Déu Research Foundation (PIC-18-21) and implemented all the necessary ethical research criteria during its performance at the UB.

3. Findings

Three broad overall categories emerged from our analysis of students' and teachers' narratives, namely: competencies related to the professional profile; elements of the professionalizing process; and education in ethical competence.

The first category (competencies related to the professional profile) brought together all the factors making up a competency profile mainly featuring relationships with others in situations of vulnerability and functioning as elements of what should be encompassed by ethical competence(s).

The second category (elements of the professionalizing process) derived its meaning from the perception that what fosters or hinders ethical competence is part of the professionalizing process. It was the richest category in terms of discourse.

The third and last category (education in ethical competence) comprised all the factors at work in education in ethical competencies.

The most extensive codes in terms of their representation in participants' testimonies are presented in the results.

3.1. Competencies Related to the Professional Profile

The first overall category that emerged was competencies related to the professional profile. This was made up of five subcategories. In order of density, these were as follows: (1) aptitudes/attitudes of the person; (2) competencies; (3) professional activity; (4) knowledge; and (5) skills, the last two having less content while still being significant (Table 1).

Table 1. Competencies related to the professional profile.

Category	Code	Code In Vivo
Aptitudes/attitudes of the person	(a) Attitudes that define the professional, i.e., empathy, use of sympathetic language, active listening, assertiveness, acceptance, judgment and commitment	<i>What a robot can't reproduce are these across-the-board competencies, and also a bit of empathy, and everyone's really empathetic, but when they really think about what empathy is, not many people have the ability to get involved. We're always judging or mentally arguing with ourselves, so active listening and empathy is what every professional should have. DGE2 [24:45]</i>
	(b) Evaluation of the professional showing these attitudes, such as being a good person, honest, responsible, consistent	<i>When you look at the educational field, for me a good professional would be one who has the utmost respect. Not only for the needs but also for the characteristics of the people you deal with and work with, and that depends on the professional role you place yourself in. DGP4 [09:00]</i>
	(c) Professionals perceiving and situating themselves towards others	<i>For me, ethical competencies are those that are related to the responsibility that you have in the performance of your work, with both intellectual honesty and an honest attitude towards what you're doing, consistency with the things that we argue for and the things that we do. DGE3 [29:37]</i>
Competencies		<i>The person has to be what comes first, with this idea of the subject as making decisions for himself. DGE1 [06:23]</i>
		<i>In my view a good professional is one who has the best skills for what they do. We're talking about very different sectors, but they should have technical and across-the-board skills, for example, they should be creative, etc., so they should have across-the-board skills for that job. They should also be people who're committed to their job, and that applies to all jobs. DGE2 [17:20]</i>
	(a) Competence (b) Across-the-board competencies (c) Social and emotional competencies	<i>Regarding ethical competencies, I'd look for ways to encourage critical thinking and self-examination so that everyone can become aware of themselves. Then there should be shared discussion, so that everyone can know what their limits are and how far they're willing to go, and they should give us techniques for encouraging these practices, but always helping to create an individual critical spirit. DGE3 [1:02:20]</i>
	(d) Critical reflective thinking (e) Ethical competence	<i>The ethical competencies mean: if a client comes to you with an appeal and you know it hasn't got the slightest chance of success, what weighs more, saying yes to make money or saying no and being honest, looking out for the client's interest? Then depending on your answer you've got ethics. DGE3 [14:47]</i>
	<i>A critical spirit, that they can keep up certain standards, especially in relation to the society they're going to come across [...]. Sometimes, they'll have to exercise effective leadership that will be efficient to the extent that they can manage to make others work and where everyone plays their role, where no one is ignored, and where everyone has to know how to respect each other and in turn exercise their role in a multidisciplinary framework. DGP4 [21:49]</i>	

Table 1. Cont.

Category	Code	Code In Vivo
Professional activity	(a) Guiding	<i>In the end, it's true that in our sector it's about guiding, teaching, supporting people on their path; the bond, the trust; so a good professional has to know how to manage those tools, relationships, emotions and guidance, being and staying present. In my opinion a good professional also means knowing how to be present and knowing how to guide people. As I tell my students "We're demanding with you, not for your sake, but because of the people we help". Therefore, being a good professional is being able to create that link, being present.</i> DGE2 [19:44]
	(b) Taking care of and communicating with others (c) Safeguarding their rights (d) Mediating/facilitating	<i>Two concepts come to mind. The first concept is awareness, being aware, and the second is responsibility. So when I was thinking about awareness I was thinking about the inclination you have to understand your task as a professional, I mean, being clear about your limitations and your possibilities and then being really clear, especially in the educational field and in any field, but in the educational field, knowing what the effects and the consequences of your actions and relationships are [...]. Also from the standpoint of responsibility it would mean fulfilling the moral obligation to respond to the demands on you as a professional and responding not only to those demands but also to the people you work with. We're in an interpersonal profession.</i> DGP6 [31:07]
Knowledge	(a) Staying updated	<i>Staying at the forefront of everything that concerns the person so that we can provide all the information they need, as good professionals. We need to be updated on everything that concerns that person.</i> DG11 [08:21]
	(b) Policies	<i>Bering policies in mind.</i> DG11 [08:21]
Skills	Skills	<i>This requires social and emotional competences and skills, because you want to get to the most personal dimension of the person.</i> DG1R [03:51]

Note: The most relevant codes and categories in the text are explained, and the table also includes the codes and categories that emerged in the analyses.

The first subcategory (**aptitudes/attitudes of the person**) was defined through three types of codes: (a) those referring to attitudes that defined the professional, i.e., empathy, use of sympathetic language, active listening, assertiveness, acceptance, judgment and commitment; (b) those referring to the evaluation of the professional showing these attitudes, such as being a good person, honest, responsible, consistent; and (c) those relating to how the professional perceived and situated her/himself towards others, emphasizing an approach centered on the person seen as an autonomously acting subject.

In the second subcategory (**competencies**), participants interpreted the concept of ethical competence(s) across a spectrum that went from the most general (its relation to what is identified as a competence) to the most specific and concrete. The codes comprising the category were: (a) competence, (b) across-the-board competencies, (c) social and emotional competencies, (d) critical reflective thinking, and (e) ethical competence. Firstly, ethics was identified as a competence, but it was stressed that all the competencies were generally applicable, particularly specifying the social, emotional and technical areas. Ethical competence did not appear in isolation, but emerged in a widespread, frequent discourse among students on all the different master's degrees in relation to other competencies, such as critical and reflective thinking (on both social and personal levels), and knowing one's own ethical limits in the context of personal integrity.

The third subcategory (**professional activity**) was similar to the second in terms of the richness of the narratives. The codes making it up represented specific activities that professionals performed and which directly brought their ethical competencies into play, namely: guiding, taking care of and communicating with others, safeguarding their rights

and mediating/facilitating. In this case, the master's degree students believed that, in their specific professional activities, the fact of relating to vulnerable or disadvantaged others demanded more of them than if their professional activity were more in the technological or applied science fields, for example.

3.2. Elements of the Professionalizing Process

This overall category was the most extensive in terms of codes and the richest in discourse. It was therefore that which emerged as the most important in terms of the relationship established between ethical competence and professionalization, bearing in mind that the master's degrees had a professionalizing rather than research emphasis (although, as they were university master's degrees, research was also taken into account in them), and that many of the students had a code of ethics that framed their ethical performance as professionals. The category was composed of four subcategories: ethical professional practice; limits; the team; and the ethical code, the last two with less weight (Table 2).

Table 2. Elements of the professionalizing process.

Category	Code	Code In Vivo
Ethical professional practice	(a) Professional vs. academic experience	<p><i>One of the mistakes we make is to think that we're going to turn students into professionals, but in reality we're part of the student's lifeline, and that lifeline will also make them grow as people. I'm Beatriz, a woman, a mother, daughter and nurse, and I believe that we have a responsibility to create, to help train these people, even if they're dedicated to something that bears no direct relation. If that person isn't well-balanced on a human level, on a relationship level, in their network, if they're not well-balanced they're sure to cause collateral damage on a personal level. And we have to acquire these relationship tools at the time when we're learning, because if not, then it's up to the willingness of each person to grow and we have to put them forward through the professional association or the field that we're in. DGP5 [25:55]</i></p> <p><i>Talking about ethics, in my professional experience I always rely my professional experience rather than the academic side. DG1M [17:10]</i></p> <p><i>Because when it comes to making decisions, not falling into prejudices as a professional. DG1R [26:53]</i></p> <p><i>I think that in the health field you're more aware that you're working with vulnerable people. As vulnerable people there's a greater tendency to protect them, that's why we're more inculcated with the issue of ethics, perhaps in the field of education it's not seen so much. DG1A [33:05]</i></p> <p><i>Also an ethical position allows the professional to see why he makes certain decisions or acts as he does, and that also helps to justify and explain the reasons for the things he does, and if he's complained about at any time or questioned by the family or a judge, well, you have this justification and the answer isn't "just because", but there's an analysis behind it. DG1M [51:24]</i></p>
	(b) Challenge	
	(c) Protection against bias	
	(d) Ethical sensitivity	
	(e) Ethical justification	
	(f) Commitment	
	(g) More than technical	
	(h) Moral vs. ethical	
	(i) Confidentiality	
	(j) Core/essential competence	
Limits	(a) Taking care of themselves	<p><i>For me, this is a really difficult question that perhaps has to do with the will that makes me separate the personal from the professional. Yes, for me it's a big question of "how far", where I set the limit, how I set my work schedule, how much work I take home at the weekend, and how I take care of my mental health. These are questions that I don't know how to answer. DGE1 [53:21]</i></p>
	(b) Maintaining balance	<p><i>On the other hand, if you find yourself in a situation that you, as a lawyer, have previously had personal experience of, you should know how to say no to that task because it reminds you of some previous professional or personal experience, and you should refer it to another colleague. DG3J [33:08]</i></p> <p><i>knowing how to find the balance of how far your mental health can handle everything... as a whole, but it has to do a lot with your commitment, with your action. DG1R [58:24]</i></p>
	(c) Knowing how to distance themselves.	

Table 2. Cont.

Category	Code	Code In Vivo
The team	(a) Team (b) Colleagues (c) Objective view	<i>In the academic part, which means working in a team, there are a lot of values such as justice, honesty... well, yes, justice, responsibility, respect when arguing an opinion, taking into account the other person you're giving your opinion to, always with respect, being fair with the situations that you're coming across, being responsible with the tasks that you have to carry out in a team. GD2E [31:29]</i>
		<i>... taking your colleagues into account, not taking decisions unilaterally, of course! [...] listening to what your colleagues have to say, even supervisors who can also give you a more objective view from the outside, for my part is essential. DG1M [09:32]</i>
		<i>An ethical competence is being able to show your own ability in the knowledge that you've been acquiring and linking it with your experiences and generally interacting as a team. DG3L [17:00]</i>
		<i>I also wanted to stress responsibility, to be an approachable, honest and engaged person, also due to the fact that you'll have to work with other professionals. In the end, if you're committed to the job and you're responsible in groupwork, in the end you get a project that's specific to your role and has valuable aims. DG2S [16:00]</i>
Professional code of ethics	(a) Sometimes insufficient (b) Inflexible or difficult to adapt (c) Since it could not foresee all possible cases	<i>In relation to the ethical code, we have to bear in mind that it's a minimum code for the most common problems in legal practice, but we have to, in universities and in general in society, we have to instil deeper ethical values for the practice of our profession and also for society in general. DGE3 [53:44]</i>
		<i>The most illustrative example would undoubtedly be the ethical code. It's a gauge that guides or should guide the professions in their daily practice and I'm afraid that at least in the educational field it's not worked on enough. I meet students who've done their fourth year and they're in the master's degree and they come from the social education degree and they don't even know that there's a code of ethics that's not only compulsory, but you have to pay attention to it, read it and think about it. DGP4 [40:25]</i>

Note: The most relevant codes and categories in the text are explained, and the table also includes the codes and categories that emerged in the analyses.

The first emergent category was **ethical professional practice**, which participants described as a challenge that created concern and which they addressed through what they had acquired in professional rather than academic experience.

Respondents stressed that the ethical sensibility and approach were present from the beginning of a relationship, linking this to the influence of the person's other dimensions. They affirmed that they saw ethics as something more than just a set of techniques and, for this reason, they understood their professional practice more as a moral exercise than as an ethical exercise (this distinction between morality and ethics was problematized, with morality operating more in everyday practice than ethics as we understand it). According to the university teachers, ethics was articulated through a process that related thoughts firstly to beliefs, then to emotions, and finally to actions.

The second subcategory, **limits**, encompassed those essential frontiers that cannot be crossed as professionals, and was interesting in that it marked out a difference between professional and personal limits, creating conflict that was resolved by inclining towards the professional point of view. Participants seemed to identify elements of a more personal nature for appropriate management of their limits: taking care of themselves, maintaining balance, and knowing how to distance themselves.

The following subcategory, **the team**, shows that the professionalization process does not take place in isolation, since it does not occur alone but in relation to others. In the development of ethical competence, the team is both crucial and complex. According to participants, the complexity inhered in their performing tasks with responsibility and respect and within a framework of individual and shared values. They also stated that ethical competence was shown in team relationships and in how professionals positioned themselves

with regard to the team. Participants highlighted the role of their colleagues as guarantors of individually made decisions that needed to be discussed and agreed upon collectively, thereby reducing elements of subjectivity and providing a more objective stance.

The fourth subcategory refers to the **professional code of ethics** and the factors involved in the relationship between professional ethics and participants' responsibilities. The code was seen as a guide that showed the way and provided support, but which was sometimes insufficient, inflexible or difficult to adapt since it could not foresee all possible cases. It therefore represented a code of minimum requirements, and additional development of deeper social and individual values was seen as necessary. Professional ethics, participants stated, was not only the code but also experience accumulated in practice.

The following subcategories had markedly lower frequency and representation; therefore, it was decided not to include them at this point.

3.3. Education in Ethical Competence

This overall category was composed of ten subcategories. Eight of these referred to the training process itself or to the elements making it up, namely: models; training approach; teacher training; need and duty; process; teaching resources and methodologies; levels; and assessment. A further subcategory titled "other disciplines/professions" referred to other professionals; and the final subcategory, no less important in terms of citations, also included negative aspects: breaches of good practice and points for improvement. Those most relevant to the discussion in this article are highlighted (Table 3).

Table 3. Education in ethical competence.

Category	Code	Code In Vivo
Models	(a) Tutors (b) Teachers (with and without ethical competence) (c) Examples to follow (d) Respect (e) Being part of one's life	<i>I don't know, what I was just thinking of was maybe a tutor, two tutors in the group, that there should be a kind of group guidance, that it shouldn't be only one teacher who has the responsibility. DGE1 [1:35:00]</i>
Training approach	(a) Reflection (b) Thinking (with emotion)	<i>For me perhaps it's different because how you train people in ethics, it depends on who trains you, they do it in one way or another, and how we understand ethics and from what point of view. In the different schools where I've worked or where I went as a child, that ethical perspective was very different, so how do you approach it? I have more questions about that, about how you work with it. DGE1 [13:37]</i> <i>Attention to people in the different disciplines requires these ethical competencies, which is a sine qua non, to gain that place and that weight in the training, and I'll say it again, it seems to me that the approach we take to ethical issues in undergraduate and masters' degrees is pretty weak. DGP4 [53:21]</i>
Teacher training	(a) Teacher training (b) Shared spaces among teachers (c) Questioning yourself for congruence	<i>I believe that ethics is essential. I think that teachers should also receive this type of training, and maybe you can convey it without having this training because you already have it, because you've already personally integrated it... In my view yes, and if we're talking about the importance of ethics and teachers having ethics and everything, I think they should receive this training. DG2E [1:31:35]</i> <i>Have teacher training that well, at the very least that would help us reflect collectively on all this and make us aware of the importance and the need to have these issues as something indispensable. DGP5 [1:37:33]</i>

Table 3. Cont.

Category	Code	Code In Vivo
Need and duty	(a) Need for ethical competence	<p><i>Obviously I agree that it's essential that professionals are fair, that they have the value of trustworthiness. I can't work with a colleague who's hiding information from me or who's acting badly with a user. For example he makes up the marks, or corrects wrongly, he's not being fair. DGE2 [41:01]</i></p> <p><i>That's the authoritarian model, but with respectful parenting, yes, there has to be an authority and a respect for the other person's views, then I don't think there's a right or wrong, but just the analysis that leads you to it. DG1I [1:03:47]</i></p>
	(b) Duty	
Process	(a) Process	<p><i>It's one step further to bringing us closer to what the university is and making it a little easier to do this master's degree, pandemic or no pandemic, and I really appreciate that there's a person who can listen and can answer questions and give us that support. DGE1 [1:38:21]</i></p> <p><i>Create a module that works on these factors, then, in relation to sensitivity; look for opportunities to help students discover things or become aware, so to speak, of how the decisions they make as professionals affect others and how they can affect a very large number of people. The second factor: to create opportunities for them to discuss what's right and what's wrong. What's ethical and what's not, and there's more reasoning in that issue; and finally, what you're looking for in education is that people also position themselves and act accordingly. DGP6 [1:03:00]</i></p> <p><i>But then there's another more complex step that would be to start including educational practices that follow this line, thinking about it from two perspectives, the practice of teaching and then the practice of assessment; what I mean is, not only class activities and teaching, but also included in the assessment. They know that what isn't assessed isn't worked on, there's the problem, we're in a situation where the assessment has a lot of weight. DGP4 [1:43:08]</i></p>
	(b) Learning process that included the need for active learning (c) Lifelong learning (d) Mentor for working	
Teaching resources and methodologies	(a) Professional conflicts	<p><i>We should bring reality closer to the students, work with real cases, incorporating competencies in our analysis of how to deal with the cases [...]. In some way we influence how we believe their professional response should be [...]; and in view of the diversity of groups, of sciences, of expectations, the ethical element is basic. DGP5 [1:08:08]</i></p> <p><i>I think that, on the master's program, we've really stressed a lot and worked a lot on different conflicts, and I think from the point of view of practice, and, above all, what I appreciate about the professionals is that they bring their professional experience and all those decisions they're making in their everyday practice and they bring them to the classroom, and we learn loads from that, we have quality debates and that's really important. DG1R [1:10:50]</i></p> <p><i>In academic internships, where you start with working in the profession, it's true that you can work on ethical competencies, especially if you have a good mentor who tries to guide you as they're delegating cases to you. Although it's true that you work especially taking into account the profession's ethical code. DG3N [55:48]</i></p>
	(b) Real/complex cases, practical cases (c) Reflexive practices (d) Academic practices (e) Portfolio	

Table 3. Cont.

Category	Code	Code In Vivo
Levels	(a) Citizen/personal ethics	<i>I have a very similar opinion to the rest of the people in the discussion group, and maybe it's a bit of a thorny subject, but I think that we should work on ethical competence in every subject and that there's no need for an ethics subject. Talking about philosophy and currents is very important, but it should be done at high school, but in a specific situation taken from our field. The teachers should talk about real cases, there are a lot of real dilemmas and it can also be useful for the students to put them into practice; they're things that people have already experienced and you only have to explain them. DGE2 [1:11:11]</i>
	(b) Primary and secondary education	<i>I think that at the level of ethics you should always work as a citizen, as a person. DG1A(11:47)</i>
	(c) University education	<i>Depending on what you want to work on in life, I think it's an education that can be given at university. I feel that I needed it because in the end what you do has a certain sense of vocation or service to others. And I think it's more guided. DG1A(11:47)</i>
		<i>The general rule is that ethical competencies aren't discussed beyond specific cases, especially on the master's degree in law, where they've been practical topics and worked out according to the corresponding lawyer for each case, but without going into detailed work on ethical competencies. DG3X [40:10]</i>
Assessment		<i>Being a nurse, I take ethics into account, [...] but in nursing they really drummed it into me, to treat or not to treat, to inform the patient, to take into account whether the family wants to be informed or not, how much information they want to have, what they want to know. All this was really instilled in me, but in education it's really hard for me to see it. DG1A [33:05]</i>
	(a) Competencies in other disciplines	<i>Yes, I think it has to do with this division between medical sciences, medicine and social sciences, that maybe a nurse or a doctor is seen as a more physical practice and the consequences are going to be physical and maybe... What's usually taken into account is that, and maybe the more social degrees don't deal with the enormous harm that can be caused when a professional makes a bad intervention. DGE1 [35:39]</i>
	(b) Model	<i>I find that the teachers make a lot of demands on the students, but on the other hand there's no right of reply. You're not complying with what you were saying before, but you can require me to deliver it on such and such a date, when you didn't give me the study plan until a month ago, so now I have to do everything in a rush. As I'm obliged to deliver it, I'll be punished, penalized if I don't deliver it on that date, but for you there's no sanction. DGE1 [1:14:18]</i>
		<i>From my point of view, you don't get any experience in ethics either in early childhood education or at university. It's true that we should think about doing it, but we get into conflict when talking about ethics: who lays the foundations and why. I think there's a certain fear of answering that question. DGP6 [27:52]</i>

Note: The most relevant codes and categories in the text are explained, and the table also includes the codes and categories that emerged in the analyses.

The first to emerge was **models**. The codes comprising this subcategory were: tutors; teachers (with and without ethical competence); examples to follow; respect; and being part of one's life. The students affirmed that in the first place, their internship tutors and secondly, their teachers were important models in their learning of ethical competence; and they emphasized that some seemed to have assimilated ethical competencies, while others had not. In the first case, the tutors or teachers were seen as models to be followed, and this appeared frequently in participants' testimonies. The teachers concurred with this view, some of them being of the opinion that students learn not only from what we say but also from what we do, and they stressed the respect they show for others and that in the end, they form part of their lives.

The second subcategory was the **training approach**, which depended on the teachers. Students positively valued participation by tutors from other fields, offering alternative visions or perspectives and questioning absolute truths. The following two codes, reflection and thinking (with emotion), indicated that reflection stems from a base and learning from a process, thus making participants aware that there was an emotional content in their thoughts, and that this occurred in any normal person. The final codes that make up this category referred to elements that contributed to the formation of ethical competence: theoretical bases; cross-curricular work; providing classroom opportunities for constructive dialogue; and encouraging critical thinking.

The third subcategory was **teacher training**. This classification showed the need detected by students for training in ethical competence, and put forward some initiatives that may help in this regard. They affirmed that teachers should undergo this training for two reasons: to be able to convey it in the classroom; and to be able to incorporate it in their everyday practice as professionals. They suggested the creation of group opportunities for interaction, self-examination and dialogue (as reflective practice) around their own practice and development of ethical competence as teachers.

The fourth subcategory was the **need for ethical competence and duty**. The relationship between ethics and good professionalism emerged in participants' views. This relationship also appeared in other categories since, at several points in the discussions, it was made clear that to be a good professional, it was necessary to be a good person.

The fifth category was **process**, or a learning process that included the need for active, lifelong learning, in which the figure of the mentor for working on ethical competencies was highlighted.

The sixth subcategory was **teaching resources and methodologies**. Students positively valued the fact that they were brought closer to professional reality through the experience of teachers who were also acting professionals in their field and who directly experienced the dilemmas presented in class and in case studies (seen as real, complex and practical). Although the use of real cases was a highly valued approach, the students mentioned that in some master's programs, it was the only method through which ethical competencies were worked on. Another important area was the professional internship, which, by bringing students closer to working realities, explicitly showed the need to cultivate ethical competencies, since they were needed during the practicum. In some cases, however—law, for example—students indicated that the ethical code of the profession was used exclusively to work on competence. What these internships had in common, and what emerged as a generally applicable code in this category, was that all these methods helped students' reflection during the master's degree, something that did not occur if an approach was abused, as in the example of the portfolio. Students highlighted the idea that an overload of certain exercises could have a negative effect on the learning of competence.

The category of **levels** referred to the different academic levels at which training in ethical competence should be given. Students particularly stressed that such training should be present at all levels and in a cross-curricular manner. They remarked on both a lack of training in this area at the universities, and the teachers who did show it or work on it in their classes.

The final subcategory, **breaches of assessment**, emerged during the elaboration of the previous categories. In the first code, competencies in other disciplines, the participants noted differences among the master's degrees and highlighted the fact that there were professional fields in which ethical competencies were worked on more when they were perceived as a necessary overall competence. They compared the medical sciences (health) to the social sciences, stating that the harm that could be caused in professional practice was different depending on the area in which one was acting, the socio-educational area being less important. They attributed this to the lack of visibility of certain social harms, which may be caused but were difficult to detect.

In relation to the code titled model, participants also commented that they learned even when their lecturers did not act correctly, due to the negative impact this had on them.

Lastly, it was highlighted that the bureaucratization of the university was a hindrance to the development of ethical training. Thus, participants were of the opinion that the focus should not only be placed on teaching staff but also on the broader context, such as the institutional one, which could be a factor obstructing teaching.

4. Discussion

Based on our findings, and linking them to the objectives presented at the beginning of this article, we can conclude in relation to the first objective:

Ethical competence is a complex competence that encompasses extremely diverse elements, and this makes it very difficult to understand if we do not dynamically and interactively account for and combine all the elements that make it up. Its multidimensionality and manifold facets—knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes and aptitudes—need to be complemented with fundamental contextual and structuring factors such as knowledge of the code of ethics, the context, ethical tension, teamwork, the search for the common good, the limits to be adhered to and discussion/reflection in decision making [4].

The three dimensions discussed above show the importance of ethical competence in professional practice and the professionalization process, in both of which competence is a necessary constitutive element [8]. Significantly, its component factors transcend the professional field itself and are embodied in the person, requiring awareness and consistency [27]; this, therefore, calls for a master's degree centered on the person and placing value on her or his experiences.

Teachers, acting professionals and students all saw ethical competence as an essential part of professional development, rather than an added value, and even more so in professions involving caring for others in situations of vulnerability, dependence or insecurity. Ethical competence, therefore, guarantees the protection of the person attended to from malicious acts on the part of professionals (user safety) [28]. To this end, training is needed, not only for students but also for teachers, in order to create the necessary conditions for ethical learning, encouraging reflection, critical analysis and application.

Ethical competence was thus identified as a process articulating thought, emotion and action. It favors processes linking it to experience rather than theory or abstract knowledge or through presenting technical or theoretical issues unconnectedly. It is a competence that is materialized, and thus becomes visible, when it is actually in play, when the process is being applied and carried out (which in turn prompts us to think about methodologies and forms of assessment in university education) [29]. At present, university education makes sense if it provides opportunities for “knowing” combined with others for learning how to reflect on and critically analyze social reality.

Furthermore, self-care, mental balance, and general well-being as professionals help to develop and to demonstrate ethical competence [30]. It may even happen, if the competence is poorly developed, that this has a negative impact on the professional, generating unease (what the participants called “not crossing the limits”). This idea appeared as significant in the *limits* category, within the dimension conceptualized as *elements of the professionalizing process*, in moments of conflict between the personal and professional realms.

Participants learned from their models and stressed that both teachers and tutors were examples of these. Moreover, the students emphasized this both when their role models acted appropriately and when they did not, in the latter case making unethical behaviors visible. These findings suggest that the teacher is not only a mediator of knowledge or a facilitator of learning, but also becomes an example and paradigm. Clarifying teachers' awareness of this role and helping them to take on responsibility for it requires teachers who are solidly trained not only professionally, but also personally [31].

Participants' contributions seemed to place greater emphasis on the development of social and moral reflection, although they did not neglect other dimensions of ethical competence. We are referring, in this respect, to the construction of the self (for example, when alluding to the clarification of one's own position, personal values, and the self-

knowledge necessary to avoid exceeding limits), and also to conviviality (for example, when discussing attention to social needs and working in a team) [16].

With regard to the second objective, centered on analyzing the factors facilitating or hindering the development of ethical competence, it can be concluded that:

Teamwork is of importance in the deliberative process from different perspectives, both technical and ethical. Both teachers and students stressed this for their practice since it involved a whole series of social, communicative and social skills. Morality can arise on an individual level; yet, ethics, while open to personal reflection, is better practiced jointly with others [5]. Our findings in the dimension of competencies relating to the professional profile are relevant here, mainly those linked to individual attitudes and skills such as empathy, active listening, assertiveness, commitment, acceptance, honesty, responsibility and consistency, all vital for teamwork.

Knowledge of the profession's ethical code was considered positive and necessary, but at the same time, the code was seen as too rigid for analyzing situations in context. When professionals act within this framework, they need to be able to adjust, adapt or interpret the code in the light of the specific case and context. To this end, they must be mature and experienced and have an in-depth knowledge of their field of competence, so that at any moment they can give an account of the reasons for their actions. This conclusion relates to the dimension of the different factors in the professionalization process, which shows that professionals need to combine academic and theoretical knowledge with experience accumulated from actual practice.

Internships are an ideal opportunity to foster the knowledge, analysis and practice of ethical competencies. However, in order to fully take advantage of the practicum, the role of tutors (in both the host institution and the university) is essential. This conclusion is closely linked to the views expressed in the category of models, from the dimension of training in ethical competence. Here, both teachers and internship tutors were highlighted as important examples of the development of ethical competence, not only in their words but also in their actions.

Working on case studies in class was seen as an excellent strategy for training in ethical competencies, since it allowed for discussion and reflection, both individually and in groups, of imaginary but possible scenarios [13]. Such case studies bring into play moral reasoning, social skills and emotional analysis for decision making. While they are teaching resources and approaches that emerge inductively in the practice of ethical development, university teachers should also continue to be trained in using them in order to incorporate them both into their professional practice and into training materials for classroom use.

Ethical competence is learned, and to this end, it is necessary to create opportunities for learning. The university is an essential setting for its development, but with regard to putting this into practice, a lack of training among university teachers is evident [14,32].

5. Conclusions

Our findings show the importance of including ethical competence in the curriculum not only implicitly, but also explicitly. At present, it is subordinated to other subject matter and not given due importance. Reflecting on ethical competence enables us to envisage professionals and citizens who can analyze, interpret, assess and respond to situations as a whole and not in a reductionist manner; professionals who are competent in technical aspects and at the same time able to grasp and manage the values implicit in each situation; and who can therefore take action from a standpoint that embraces the common good rather than solely personal interests. Ethical competence is often associated, in an instrumental and pragmatic way, with the code of ethics, but without entering into a deeper analysis of its component factors. Encouraging such in-depth analysis, reflection and critical spirit, so necessary nowadays in the academic sphere, requires going beyond simply learning the code of ethics towards pedagogical practices that can develop the ethical competencies in the sense presented in this article.

It is also clear that the teacher, through her/his practice, is a model in the students' eyes, shaping their path towards becoming good professionals; this means that tutors and mentors take advantage of opportunities for building and reflecting on professional practice are the figures who contribute most inductively to the development of ethical competence. It is important to introduce the elements of this competence consciously and explicitly in order to promote the gradual, in-depth development of a form of professional practice that encompasses ethics as a key element.

Ethics, as the field of applied philosophy that allows the systematic and critical analysis of morality, of the moral factors that guide human conduct in a given society or area of practice, is an essential foundation for the development of ethical competencies. This article focuses mainly on the relationship between ethics and ethical competencies in the strictly professional sphere (without reducing this to the ethical code of each) rather than the theoretical elaboration of the various existing ethical approaches. It is intended to offer an overview of the factors emerging from the study in this regard but does not seek to deepen their classification. In future research, it would be of interest to delve deeper into these aspects of teachers' views and thereby assess the meanings of their contextualized teaching practices.

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