Introduction

This case story outlines the development of Aston University’s Ethical Framework, which is an important part of the University strategy of ‘integrating [sustainability] issues into all aspects of University life.’ Therefore, this case is also related to P1 Purpose and P2 Values. Although not a PRME ‘principle’ the statement that follows the principles – “We understand that our own organisational practices should serve as examples of the values and attitudes we convey to our students” – is critical to developing the values and culture of the Institutions educating the future leaders of business and other organisations globally.

Challenges faced

The global environment within which the University operates is characterised by increasing change, ambiguity and uncertainty, and the ways in which members of the University operate have become more complex and regularly present new regulatory, ethical, and legal challenges. This was highlighted by the publication of The Woolf Report: An inquiry into the London School of Economic’s Links with Libya and the Lessons to be Learned.

In developing its strategy towards 2020, the University set out its plans to integrate ethics, social responsibility, and sustainability into all aspects of University life. In light of this, the University Executive and Governing Council considered the Woolf report and agreed on an action plan to clarify its ethical vision and state clearly its principles, values, and responsibilities. As part of this initiative, a working group was established to oversee the production of an Ethics Framework and review related policies and practices.

The Framework aim was to underpin the University’s commitment to high ethical standards and regulatory compliance, and to set out the broad range of regulations, policies, and practices that govern its relationships with colleagues, customers, partners, suppliers, and other stakeholders. It would set out the ethical standards expected of all members of the University in everything they do and wherever they operate. The Framework would be supported by the more detailed policies referenced from the document and, where appropriate, policies determined locally and tailored to the individual requirements of each School or department. The Framework would provide information to help all members of the University community to make good, informed business decisions and to act on them with integrity. It would also provide advice on who to approach for advice when they are facing ethical dilemmas.

Actions taken

The Ethics Framework has been developed and is supported by web-based information on Areas of Activity and Ethics Resources. The contents of the Framework are as follows:

1. Introduction from the Vice-Chancellor
2. Guiding Principles and Values. (These reflect those of the Nolan Committee Principles of Standards in Public Life. The principles include Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty, and Leadership).

3. Purpose and use of the Ethics Framework

4. Our Values

5. How to determine if something is unethical

6. Where to go for help and advice on ethical issues

7. ‘X’ University as an Ethical Organisation

8. Responsibility for the Ethics Framework

9. Gifts and donations

A leaflet on the Ethics Framework has been developed focusing on the key messages. A video has also been produced to raise awareness about the Ethics Framework amongst all members of the University Community and will be used in staff and student induction and as part of staff development activities.

A Good Governance Group has been systematically reviewing relevant University policies and procedures in the light of the ethical principles and values expressed in the above Ethics Framework and current best practice.

The working group involved in developing the Ethics Framework will also be reporting on further actions to improve awareness of ethical values and principles such as: induction of new staff and the training/guidance/updating of existing staff and how ethics/social responsibility/sustainability are covered in the curriculum for all students.

Results

The Ethics Framework aims to embed the University’s ethical values and principles into all activities and to guide behaviour of members of the University. It is intended to complement existing ethics-related policies, procedures and codes of conduct and practice, which are now listed on the University Ethics Resources Website. The framework outlines the key areas in which ethical considerations may arise, and sets out the responsibilities of individuals, groups, committees and other bodies in these areas.

All spheres of University life and activities have the potential to raise ethical concerns, from learning, teaching, and research to enterprise/commercial activity, financial transactions, student recruitment, staff-student relationships, membership of and behaviour in an academic community, alumni relations, donations, and award of honours.

The Ethics Framework is intended to guide members of the University in how to act properly with impartiality, integrity, good conscience and judgement at all times. It provides support and guidance to staff, students, members of the governing body and other stakeholders in their consideration of ethical issues arising from University activities and information about where individuals facing ethical dilemmas can seek further assistance and more detailed guidance in relation to particular spheres of activity. It is designed to become part of the way the University operates.
Aston University
Developing a university-wide ethical framework

The role of PRME/sustainability principles

1. Becoming a signatory to PRME has led to a systematic review of strategies, policies, and practices. The development of the Ethical Framework is part of this review process.
2. PRME provides the context and ‘legitimises’ embarking on initiatives that may otherwise not be addressed.