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Vetenskapsrådet

ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

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Vetenskapsrådet

Ethics = answers to questions about what one should do, and what is desirable to achieve

- Have a fundamental nature; cannot be solved solely by referring to existing convention / regulation (may *question it*, though)
- Arise at all levels: individual, group, institution, state, international
- Always in *a context*...
 - that affects options: what can be done
 - that affects consequences and responses ...
 - Surrounded by established opinions, institutions and rules
 - All of which may vary across the world and change (be changed) over time
- Assuming a universal standard (that may not – yet – be applied)
 - Basic form: we should do things of type X, and strive for things of type Y
- Accepting frequent disagreement and/or uncertainty
 - Regarding the nature of the context
 - Regarding what ethical standard to apply
 - Regarding how a standard applies to a context

Ethical Dilemmas

- **No option is perfect** according to a standard we agree on – what should we do?
- We know what different options involve and effect, but are **uncertain or disagree on how our ethical standard apply** – what should we do?
- We know all the facts, and also how different standards apply to them, but we **disagree on/are uncertain about what standard is the right one** – what should we do?
- **Very frequent situation when we strive for multiple values: Value tensions → possible ethical dilemmas**
- **Vague agreement/certainty on lofty phrases often hide underlying disagreement/uncertainty when more specificity is needed.**



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Vetenskapsrådet

Dilemmas that are *not* ethical

- You know what should be done, but it "feels hard" to do it
- You know what should be done, but it breaks a formal rule (that has been taken into account when determining what should be done)
- You know what should be done, but it may harm you (in a way that has been taken into account)
- You know what should be done, but you lack the power to do it



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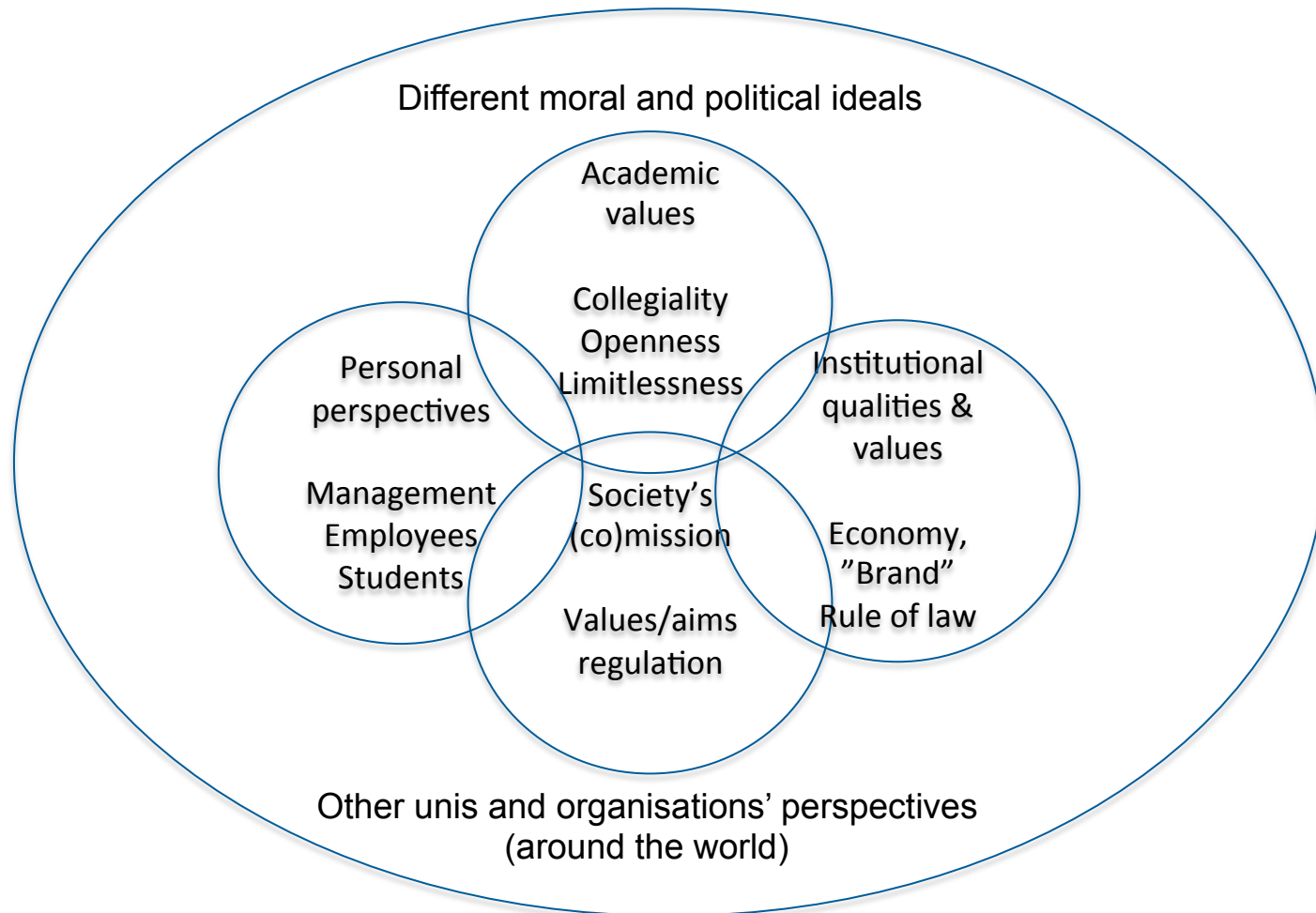
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Universities and Academia are themselves ridden with ethical dilemmas and value tensions





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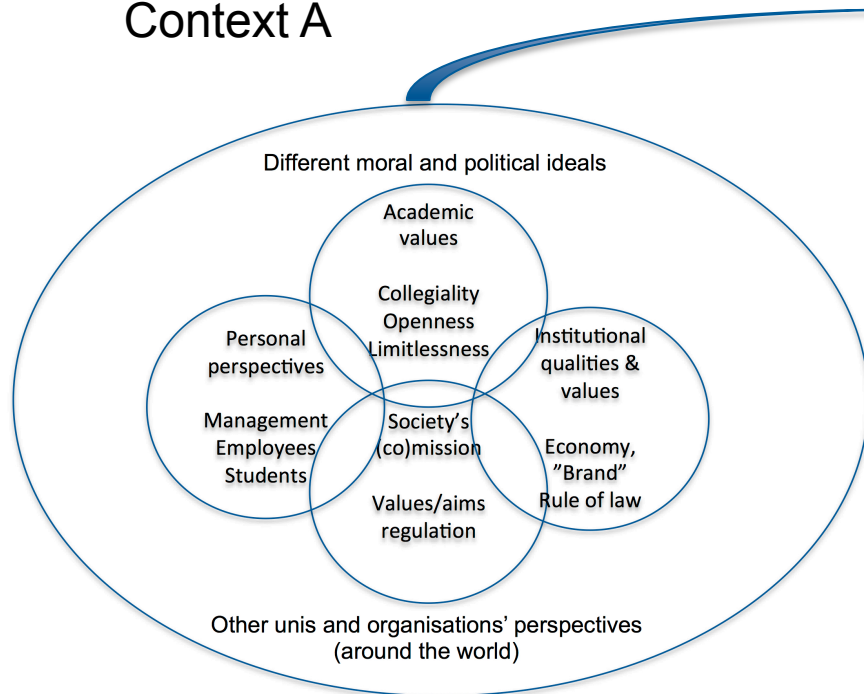
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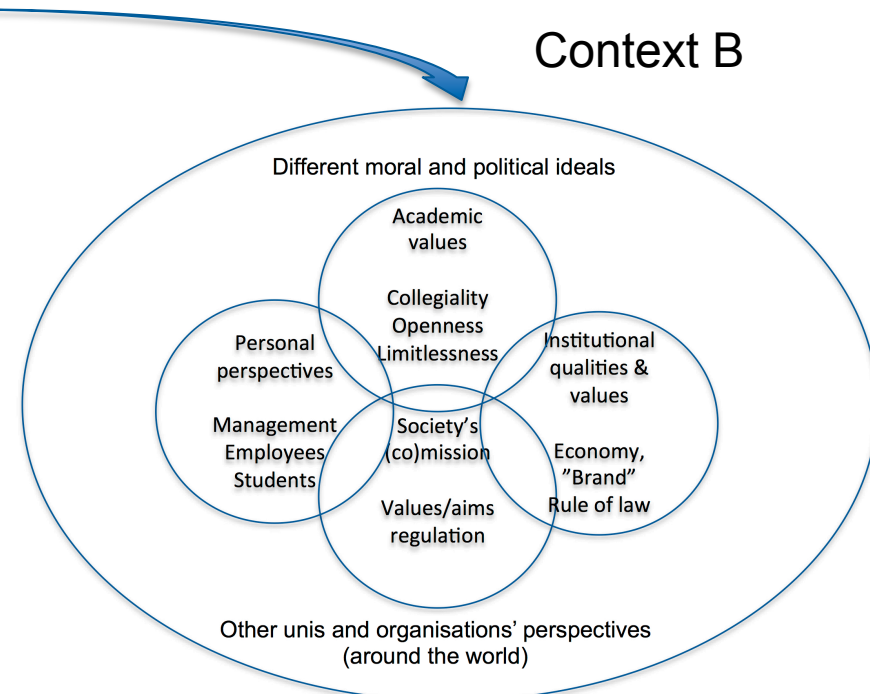


When you move, assumptions and context changes. What used to be possible to take for granted on how dilemmas are handled cannot be taken for granted anymore ...

Context A



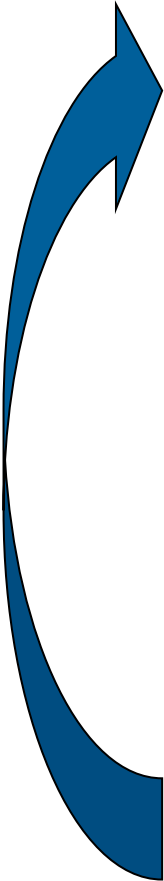
Context B



Some examples

- Different ideals about **what academia and higher education are (good) for**
- Different standards of **academic excellence and good conduct**
- Different ideas about **what academic collegiality implies**, eg. regarding partiality
- Different standards **for interacting with authority and within hierarchical structures**
- Different **institutional ideals and values**, e.g. regarding corruption, academic independence, etc.
- Different ideals about **the relationship between academia and politics**
- Different ideals about the **relation between academia and private life**

Analytic checklist for apparent ethical dilemma

- 
- Who is the agent? / Who faces a decision?
 - What are the options (faced by this agent)?
 - Who are affected by the options and how?
 - What are the (more or less likely) consequences of the options?
 - What values are at stake and how? (according to different standards)
 - What norms may apply and how? (according to different standards)
 - How may values and norms in potential conflict be balanced? (according to different standards)

RESULT: A description of the nature of an ethical dilemma, or a discovery that there are no value or normative conflicts (so that there is no dilemma)

Solving a dilemma requires a constantly motivated *normative judgement* regarding what values, norms and balances are most justified.

Common phenomenon: analysing a dilemma leads to discovery of new options → new apparent dilemma to analyse, or the dilemma resolves

When solving the dilemma is hard: do the analysis on another level of agency – maybe the dilemma is not for you to solve?