

## Character, Phronesis and Professional Education

**Tom Harrison and Binish Khatoun**

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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4865

E: [jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk) W: [www.jubileecentre.ac.uk](http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk)



# Character, *Phronesis* and Professional Education

Tom Harrison and Binish Khatoon

*This paper gives an account of the development, delivery and ongoing pilot of a new intervention designed to introduce the concepts of character, virtue and phronesis to lawyers, doctors and teachers. Evidence shows that members of these professions, and others, are not being sufficiently prepared to deal with the ethical dimensions of their practice and that pre and in service educational programmes typically spend little or no time on character and virtue-based approaches to professional ethical education. The paper describes a new approach to the education of professionals, which is founded on the building of moral character virtues and importantly the meta-virtue of phronesis. The intervention is being subjected to various forms of evaluation to determine: i) how might virtue-based ethical education be delivered to teachers, doctors and lawyers? ; and, ii) what influence does the pilot course have on the doctors, teachers and lawyers who participate in them? Do they develop the virtue knowledge, reasoning and ideally the practice of the members of these professions? The paper will present some initial findings from the evaluation.*

## Introduction

*'The professions enjoy a unique and privileged place in the public eye. They are relied upon for moral probity, diligence, fairness and resolve, frequently in complicated circumstances and often in the face of conflicting demands. Professional people are expected to do the right thing; and they are expected to do the right thing both for individuals – be they clients, customers, patients, pupils, victims of crime or enemy combatants – and for society at large.'*  
(Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2016)

This paper gives an overview and update on the 'Character in the Professions' online training course for medics, lawyers and teachers. The course, which can be described as an educational intervention, enables lawyers, doctors and teachers to explore what it means to be a virtuous professional in their area of expertise. The paper will start by highlighting a change, noted by various researchers (Coulehan, 2005; Bryan and Babelay, 2009; Toon, 2014; Eckles *et al.*, 2005:1145) in the educational emphasis from character to technical competency, in professional education. Arguments for the need to realign education, with a focus on core virtues associated with being a 'good' professional, are provided at the start. The main section of this paper will be an overview of the content of the course and key features designed to introduce the concept of *phronesis*. The course is divided into three units and each unit consists of a series of steps. In unit 1 students learn about character and character education, virtue ethics and *phronesis*. In unit 2 students get the chance to think about how they might apply *phronesis* to ethical dilemmas relating to their practice. Unit 3 is designed to encourage students to reflect on what they have learnt from the course. The key elements of each of these units will be critically evaluated. As well as providing a description of the course content and approach, the paper will also give some early findings from the evaluation.

## **Time to re-think professional education**

In recent years there have been many high profile examples of what might be described as ‘unvirtuous practice’ by professions (see, for example, Blond *et al.*, 2015). One argument put forward for this is that the development of contemporary sciences and the advent of the industrial revolution have resulted in the erosion and sometimes outright rejection of virtue-based theories (MacIntyre, 1984; Veatch 1985). The ethical management of professional practice has become immersed in this tradition and is dominated by codes of conduct, largely based on deontological and utilitarian lines of thinking (Burrige and Webb, 2007; de Zulueta 2015; Shortt *et al.*, 2012). Schwartz and Sharpe (2010) argue that this carrot-and-stick method of ever stricter rules and greater rewards does not work and it is important to recognise that many moral considerations are uncodifiable. As Johnson and Ridley (2008, p. xvi) note, “Much like laws, ethics codes often are concerned with minimum standards of practice . . . Ethical excellence requires more than adherence to minimum standards. It demands a deeper commitment to live according to bedrock virtues and aspire to timeless principles”. In addition, deontological and utilitarian theories do not recognise the prominence of ethically varied role-differentiating features of most professions (Oakley, 2015). This situation is leading to eroding public trust in the professions (Tallis, 2006).

Research shows that professional education broadly reflects the dominant tradition and ethical training of professionals focuses primarily on codes of conduct (Jubilee Centre, 2016). This is the case in the training of teachers (Freeman, 1998; Campbell, 2000, 2001; Strike and Ternasky, 1993), medics (Pellegrino and Thomasma 1993; Pellegrino 2007) and lawyers (Duncan and Kay, 2010). Recently, in these professions (and others) there has been a backlash against this seemingly dominant approach. If the situation is allowed to persist it could be problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, the dominant codes of conduct are at times abstract and the ideal professionals are often called on to use their character virtues to judge situations that are not covered by any ethical standards (Shortt *et al.*, 2012). Secondly, professionals may find a tension between following the code, and at the same time being true to the conviction of their character (Carr, 2000; Strike and Soltis, 1992; Shortt *et al.*, 2012; Cody, 2015). This could erode integrity by putting a barrier between professional conduct and personal values, beliefs, truthfulness, conscience, and the internal necessity to care (Krieger, 2004). Thirdly, written codes are not aspirational (Burrige and Webb, 2007) but are fundamentally disciplinary; they sometimes result in professionals conforming to duty and trying to avoid negative consequences rather than at times taking positive action (Victor and Cullen, 1988; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). Fourthly, it has been found that certain behaviours developed during preliminary training often correlate with future behaviour (Papadakis *et al.*, 2005, 2008). These challenges mean that current approaches to education are insufficient and if the professions are to become more virtuous, there is a need to revisit the foundations of the ethical teaching they receive (Jubilee Centre, 2016; Doddington *et al.*, 2013).

## **Virtue ethics based approaches to professional education**

*‘A virtue-based approach to professional education would seek to strengthen the character of all who engage in professional practice.’ (Jubilee Centre, 2016)*

Education for students aspiring to join any profession should provide them with a desire to be a *good* professional and not just a professional. Research (Arthur *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c) has

shown that experienced practitioners highlight shortcomings of contemporary professional ethical education, notably an over-emphasis on abstract moral principles (such as patient autonomy, in medicine) or technical competencies (such as behaviour-management 'techniques', in teaching). Trainees and early career professionals also learn about practical codes and rules (on 'bedside manners' or dress codes, for example). Less attention however tends to be given to the moral dilemmas that test the character of professionals. What is needed is appropriate moral reflection, evaluation and action, particularly on the part of today's trainees, graduate-level entrants and early career professionals who will become the leaders of their professions (Jubilee Centre, 2016).

This argument has led to a growing call for the ethical education of professions to include modules on virtue ethics (Miles *et al.*, 1989; Musick, 1999; Fox *et al.*, 1995; Eckles *et al.*, 2005) emphasising the meta virtue of *phronesis* (Schwartz and Sharpe 2010; Miles *et al.*, 1989; Singer, 2000; Sulmasy, 2000; Shelton, 1999). Further, empirical research has shown professionals themselves have identified the need to be provided with character-based ethical training (Arthur *et al.*, 2015; Carey *et al.*, 2015). Although there has been some limited challenge to this position (Menkel-Meadow, 1991) it is now widely accepted that virtue-based approaches to training will strengthen the character of professionals (CIPD, 2016) and may help towards making education a morally fulfilling experience, for teachers and students (Kristjánsson 2015).

In recent years there has been a revival in virtue ethics as a viable alternative moral theory to deontology and utilitarianism (Anscombe, 1958; Foot, 1978; Hursthouse, 1996, 1999). 'Virtue ethics' refers to any moral theory that foregrounds the concepts of character and virtue, and its roots are typically based in Aristotelian philosophy (Kristjánsson, 2015). In comparison to utilitarianism and deontology, virtue ethics, with its focus on character, takes an 'agent-orientated' or 'person-centred' approach to understanding human conduct. It forces us to make moral valuations of one's character (Saguil, 2006). Aside from the professions discussed here, virtue ethics has also been seen as integral to the education of other professions, including nursing (Vanlaere and Gastmans 2007) business (Mintz, 1996), social work (Pullen-Sansfacon 2010), youth work (Bessant 2009) sports coaching (Hardman *et al.*, 2010), and the military (Olsthoorn 2013) amongst others.

The present project was based on a belief that character-and-virtue-based education programmes are required to bolster existing approaches to the ethical training of professionals. Two central virtue ethical concepts help define such an approach. The first is *arete* or virtue. Research has shown that different professions prioritise different virtues. Cooke and Carr (2014) propose that there are more role-specific qualities of moral character in professionals that we should look for and seek to develop. For example, in law medicine and teaching, there are specific and diverse requirements from the professionals which call for a difference in the value and esteem placed upon particular virtues. A lawyer might emphasise justice, whilst a teacher might require creativity, a doctor judgement and compassion and so forth. The second central concept, *phronesis*, is required for balancing the virtues with the specificities of the situation which would allow the professional to negotiate the dilemma, review the situation and to reach a virtuous outcome. According to Aristotle, before one can become completely virtuous, one's virtuous actions must be integrated with *phronesis*. To understand the meaning of *phronesis*, we ought to understand the person who possesses *phronesis* - the *phronimos*. The *phronimos* would be in a true state of capacity to act with regards to the things that are good or bad for him (Irwin, 1999). The different interpretations of the definition of *phronesis* can take discussions in many directions (Noel, 1999). A widely accepted interpretation describes the *Phronimos* as someone who would be able to measure well what is good and beneficial for him or her, and this would not be in a way to improve his health or strength,

but to consider things that conduce to the good life overall (Aristotle, 1984:142) and most interpretations generally draw on similar underlying understandings (Irwin, 1985; Schuchman, 1980).

One focus of professional education should be to help teachers, doctors or lawyers (and other professionals) to make wiser decisions and better moral judgements when they are faced with an ethical dilemma. This requires reflecting on experiences in order to understand the moral norms embodied in actions (Graham, 1995). Virtue based ethical education would primarily focus on the person, helping them to negotiate dilemmatic space and evaluate the place of virtue-based reasoning in the process. To understand the moral essence of being a professional, one needs to look closely at the complexities and ethical problems in practice. Such preparation will help 'tune' the practice in a way that will allow professionals to make better judgments when virtues collide, or there is a clash between codes of conducts and personal virtues. It helps them to develop their ethical knowledge and hone moral sensibilities (Campbell, 2008). However, the big question is: can character virtues and *phronesis* be augmented throughout professional education with the aim of enabling teachers, medics and lawyers to flourish in their role?

The core focus of the Character in the Professions course was an attempt to develop *virtue reasoning* in professionals (Arthur *et al.*, 2016). Moral reasoning is closely related to moral character, moral judgment, moral sensitivity and moral motivation, emphasised in the so-called four component model of moral functioning (Rest 1986). Virtue reasoning can be viewed developmentally as it recognises the importance of learning experiences that disrupt existing cognitive structures by introducing new and perhaps more complex ways of making judgments about behaviour. Like moral reasoning, virtue reasoning builds on the idea of rational judgments but places the emphasis firmly on character virtues and in particular the concept of *phronesis*. Virtue reasoning is concerned with the relationship and interaction between the virtues in any given moral dilemma, as much as with the end goal of defining an appropriate course of action. Learning how to respond to dilemmas is an important part of virtue reasoning and as such an essential component of the course. Repeated exposure to dilemmas might be seen as a form of habituation where students are gradually brought to more critical discriminations with the guidance of an outside instructor (Sorensen, Miller and Cabe, 2015). Evidence shows that the use of real life dilemmas can provide a useful basis for student discussions and may encourage moral reasoning development (Van Hise and Massey 2010; Rest 1986; Mintz 2006; Pullen-Sansfacon 2010). However, such an activity would need to be presented in combination with shared reflection and not in isolation (Benninga, Sparks and Tracz, 2011; Bullough 2011; Biesta 2009). The rehearsals required for acquiring the virtues 'must involve the employment of critical capacities, such as attending to a goal, recognizing mistakes and learning from them, understanding instructions, following tips and cues' and so forth. Thus, habituation constitutes a 'critical practice': a gradual process of moral sensitisation' (Sherman, 1989, p. 153-99).

Despite the infamous gap identified between moral knowledge, reasoning and moral action (Blasi, 1980), it can be hypothesised that those who possess moral reasoning are more likely to practice virtues. It is virtue practice which should be the ultimate aim of the course – so that the professionals in training do not just acquire some cognitive understanding of what would be the desirable virtue to display in certain circumstances, but be unable to translate this knowledge and reasoning into every day and real-life action.

## Description of online character education course

Presently, there is little agreement about how best to understand let alone educate the moral character of professionals. For this reason, the evaluation of the intervention described in this paper should be viewed as a pilot, designed to test out some promising theoretical and practical approaches. It was important for the project team, from the outset, to work with experts from the three professions. The first step in the development of the course was to draw together teachers of Medicine, Teaching and Law into an advisory group. This group helped to shape the approach, content and format of the resulting course. In particular they provided expert guidance on: whether an online, face-to-face or blended learning format be adopted; if the course should contain formative and summative assessments; and how the course should be constructed to allow flexibility for the variety of contexts they would be delivered within. Experts from the professions were also invited to develop content (including short teaching films and learning activities). In addition, they offered ongoing and critical evaluation of the course structure and content throughout its development.

The course currently being piloted is divided into three units and each unit consists of a series of steps. Within each step an overview and some learning activities as well as some suggested additional learning resources are given. In unit 1 students learn what character and character education, virtue ethics and *phronesis* are. In unit 2 students get the chance to think about how they might apply *phronesis* to ethical dilemmas relating to their practice. Students consider the link between character, virtue and some of the public scandals in their profession. In this unit students also reflect on their own personal character strengths and how they relate to how they practice. Unit 3 is designed to encourage students to reflect on what they have learnt from the course. An overview of the medicine course which is being piloted can be seen in **table 1** – the content has been adapted and made context specific for the medicine and teaching versions of the course.

**Table 1: Layout of the Character in the Professions course**

Landing page: Welcome to the Character in the Professions: Medicine course		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcome text</li> <li>• Background to the course film by Dr Tom Harrison</li> <li>• pre-course survey</li> <li>• Links to all three units</li> </ul>		
Unit 1: Introduction	Unit 2: Character in Medicine	Unit 3: Reflection
<p><i>1.1 Introduction to the course:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course structure film by Dr Binish Khatoon</li> <li>• Introduction to discussion boards</li> <li>• Prezi presentation</li> <li>• Course overview details</li> </ul> <p><i>1.2 What is virtue ethics?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Film on virtue ethics by Prof Kristján Kristjánsson</li> <li>• Prezi presentation</li> <li>• 5 activities</li> </ul> <p><i>1.3 What is phronesis?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Film on phronesis by Prof Kristján Kristjánsson</li> <li>• PowerPoint presentation</li> <li>• 1 activity</li> </ul> <p><i>1.4 Phronesis in the professions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Film on phronesis in the professions by Dr Sabena Jameel</li> <li>• 2 activities</li> </ul> <p><i>1.5 Why does character matter?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues trailer for documentary</li> <li>• 4 activities</li> </ul> <p><i>1.6 Reflection</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quiz</li> </ul>	<p><i>2.1 Phronesis in Medicine</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intro film by Dr Sabena Jameel</li> <li>• 1 activity</li> </ul> <p><i>2.2 Doctors in the News</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Film on doctors in the news by Dr Sabena Jameel</li> <li>• 5 activities</li> </ul> <p><i>2.3 Personal Character Strengths</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Video on Integrity</li> <li>• Prezi presentation</li> <li>• 4 activities</li> </ul> <p><i>2.4 Role models</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 activities</li> </ul> <p><i>2.5 Ethical dilemmas</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Film on ethical dilemmas by Dr Sabena Jameel</li> <li>• 1 activity</li> </ul> <p><i>2.6 Good Medical practice</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 activities</li> </ul>	<p><i>Film by Dr Tom Harrison</i></p> <p><i>Quiz</i></p> <p><i>6 reflection activities:</i></p> <p><i>Reflective Essay</i></p> <p><i>Presentation Activity</i></p> <p><i>Ethical Dilemma App</i></p> <p><i>Character Strengths</i></p> <p><i>Debate</i></p> <p><i>News Search</i></p>

The course was designed as an introduction to character, virtue and *phronesis* in the professions. In compiling the content of the course, it was assumed that students had little or no previous knowledge of the theme. Once the content was developed and approved by the advisory group, it was compiled and built into an online course hosted on a hidden platform on the Jubilee Centre website.

### **Piloting the Course**

Organisations in Britain, educating teachers, doctors and lawyers, were contacted for the purpose of piloting the course with their students. We are working with the organisations to develop bespoke programmes of learning that matched their specific educational and logistical requirements. The courses are designed so that they could either be student or tutor led in one of the following ways:

- A) **Tutor led:** Tutors lead students through the three units, selecting the most useful sections as the basis for their teaching. Tutors identify activities that the students carry out on their own or in small groups and recommend which activities on the discussion board to complete. Students can also be encouraged to complete sections and activities in their own time.
- B) **Student led:** Tutors introduce the course and encourage students to work their way through it at their own pace. Tutors check in on the progress and also ideally run a summary of learning session at the end.
- C) **Research team led:** Members of the project research team, in partnership with tutors, lead the piloting of the course.

The table below details the organisations who are currently in the pilot.



**Table 2: Organisations piloting/piloted the course.**

<b>Profession</b>	<b>Institute</b>	<b>Cohort</b>	<b>Estimated number of students/trainees piloting the course</b>	<b>Teaching method</b>
<b>Medicine</b>	Blackburn Teaching Hospital	F2 medic trainees	50	Research team lead alongside tutors. Trainees were split into two groups and each group was taught parts of unit 1 and unit 2 face-to-face through completing activities. The course was piloted over 2 sessions lasting 4 hours.
<b>Medicine</b>	University of Leicester Medical School	1 <sup>st</sup> year students	265	Students were introduced to the course in a workshop during induction week. The course was completed online via iPads during induction week. Students used their iPads in class and were supervised by clinical teaching fellows. Students were given 2 hours with tutor support to complete any unfinished work by 30 <sup>th</sup> September 2016.
<b>Medicine</b>	Imperial School of Medicine	FY tutors who will then 'teach the course' to year 3 students	65	Tutors will train their FY trainees and they will go on to teach the course to their students.
<b>Law</b>	University of Huddersfield	Year 1, 2, 3, and 4 Undergraduate law students	20	Researcher taught the course in one day over 4 hours face-to-face using online material from the course. Parts of both unit 1 and unit 2 were piloted. The tutor decided which stages of the course he would like his students to experience.
<b>Law</b>	University of Leicester	1 <sup>st</sup> year Undergraduate law students	10	Tutor taught a session to 500 students on virtue ethics and used ethical dilemmas activity. Volunteers opted to complete the full online course at a later date with tutor.
<b>Law</b>	Nottingham Trent University	3 <sup>rd</sup> year LLB students, Path to professional practice students, LPC students, BPTC students and trade mark students.	30	Tutor initially gave briefing session for the third year LLB module, Path to Professional Practice, LPC and BPTC students and trade mark students. Students complete the initial stages during class, but complete the rest of the course online, with a final "wash up" session at the beginning of next term.

<b>Law</b>	University of Warwick	All years	39	Students were invited to attend a workshop which introduced the course. Students signed up and completed a bespoke course plan created specifically for this cohort of students. Their tutor chose the stages that he would like students to complete from all units. Students complete the course and submit a summative writing assessment on January 15 <sup>th</sup> 2017, which will mark the completion of course.
<b>Law</b>	University of Law	LLB Students years 1, 2, and 3. LPC students and GDL students.	50	Tutor advertised the course to students. Fifty students showed interest by signing up. Students are completing the course themselves in their own time and tutor has given them a deadline for when they should have completed the course.
<b>Law</b>	University of Birmingham	Y2 students	50	The course was delivered as part of a wider module on ethics.
<b>Teaching</b>	University of Sussex	Initial Teacher education course	15 piloted the full course. 320 were delivered a lecture on unit 1.	A lecture was delivered to 320 students on virtue ethics - unit 1 of the course. Students were then invited to attend a face-to-face session to complete the rest of the course. Sessions lasted 4 hours with a break in between. One hour was spent on reviewing and discussing dilemmas.
<b>Teaching</b>	University of Birmingham	Primary PGCE students	120	Students were introduced to the course and parts of unit 1 and unit 2 were taught face-to-face and the rest of course was completed by students in their own time.
<b>Teaching</b>	University of Birmingham	PGCE Religious Education students	20	Face-to-face introductory session was given to students and they were asked to complete the course in their own time.

## Evaluating the Pilot Course

To evaluate the pilot course, a mixed-methods approach has been adopted to gain a more complete view of the efficiency, effectiveness and relevance of the course. Three methods have been used. Firstly, some of the students are completing a pre and post test. Secondly, interviews are being conducted with some of the participating students and tutors. Finally, a thematic analysis of some of the students written material is being analysed. Combined, the data collected from these methods will help to answer the following evaluation questions:

- i) *How might virtue-based ethical education be delivered to teachers, doctors and lawyers?*
- ii) *What influence do the pilot courses have on the doctors, teachers and lawyers who participate in them? Do they develop the virtue knowledge, reasoning and practice of the members of these professions?*

The findings from this research (to be reported in November 2017) will hopefully provide evidence for a more widespread inclusion of virtue based approaches in professional education. The results of the pilot study will also help determine what revisions are made to the course, as well as the eventual format they are offered out in.

### Some Early findings

The piloting of the course is currently in progress and results are due to be reported in November 2017. Below are some tentative and early findings from evaluation question 1 – *How might virtue-based ethical education be delivered to teachers, doctors and lawyers?* The findings reported below are primarily drawn from limited qualitative data. Further evidence to support or deny these findings will be collected as the pilot continues.

- There is a considerable challenge in finding an appropriate format for the course that is suitable for multiple audiences. There is no consistency for how ethical education is delivered across or even within the professions, which makes it challenging to find a 'one size fits all' structure. In response to this challenge several tutors have suggested that rather than organising the content into a pre-defined course, it would be better to offer the learning materials on a platform that tutors can use to build their own bespoke programmes of learning.
- Where the course is not built into the existing curriculum it is difficult to attract students to participate in the course voluntarily. Certifications of the programme and assessment credits have been offered by some organisations and this has resulted in increased participation and engagement.
- Tutors in the programme have welcomed the course and felt that it is an area of learning that was missing from the courses that they already offer. However, some tutors who initially expressed an interest dropped out of the pilot as they were unable to create a space and time for the course in their existing programme.
- The discussion boards have not worked as anticipated. It was hoped that they would drive up participation and engagement in the learning (consistent with online learning recommended practice). However, due to the pilot taking place across multiple sites and at different times, as

well as concerns about monitoring and facilitation, many tutors / students have elected not to use them.

- The online platform for the course has worked well. However, students and tutors have requested hard copies of the course activities so that they can refer to printed material as well as use online visual optics for some of the activities. It seems some tutors and institutions are not fully ready for online learning courses.
- Tutors piloting the course feel that students would relate to the courses more if professionals from each of the professions were involved in creating the materials and films, as it would personalise the material and encourage students to learn. Tutors feel that the more prominent the featured individuals, the greater the impact.
- As the pilot period has progressed, it has become apparent that tutors want to choose the activities that they would want students to pilot, especially where they are leading the learning. As a result, bespoke course plans have been created for a number of tutors. The course plans consist of a list of activities, the material needed to complete the stage and a link to the page.

Qualitative feedback on the course has been positive, with participants suggesting that it has had an influence on their virtue knowledge and understanding. For example, a trainee medic commented *'It will help me to consider the impact of decisions I make to both a patient and myself'* and a trainee lawyer commented *'By placing me in issues that could arise, it has given me a wider knowledge of not only what to expect but also how I may have to deal with them. I've gained a deeper understanding of implications of the conflict between rules and ethics. I would be more aware in the future'*. It is hoped that these early positive indicators will be supported by the more substantive and triangulated quantitative and qualitative data that is to follow.

### **Next Steps**

After the pilot and reporting of the evaluation results it is proposed that the course will be moved to an updated online platform and will be made freely available for students, trainees and professionals to access. Universities will be encouraged to include the course in their teaching syllabus, whilst the NHS and relevant regulators for medical and legal professions will also be provided with access. The hope is that the course will contribute to developing a culture of understanding of character and service within professional organisations. Ultimately, the success of the interventions will be judged through evidence of students and professionals developing their character and virtue knowledge, but more importantly virtue reasoning and practice when faced with an ethical dilemma.

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