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# Character Education in Higher Education: A Systematic Review of Moral Development, Values Education, and Virtue Formation in University Settings

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**Abstract**

Background: Character education in higher education has gained increasing attention as universities recognize their role in developing not only academic competencies but also moral reasoning, ethical decision-making, and virtue formation in students. Despite growing institutional commitment, the evidence base regarding the effectiveness of character education programs on moral development outcomes remains fragmented. Objectives: This systematic literature review aimed to synthesize evidence on the effects of character education programs, including moral development curricula, values education, ethical education, character formation programs, and virtue education, on moral development outcomes in university students. Methods: A comprehensive search was conducted across four databases (SciSpace, SciSpace Full Text, Google Scholar, and PubMed), yielding 548 records. After removing 118 duplicates and applying two-stage screening using predefined eligibility criteria, 35 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis. Results: The included studies employed diverse methodological approaches and examined a wide range of character education interventions. Evidence indicates that service-learning, problem-based ethics education, and integrated character education models positively influence moral reasoning and ethical decision-making. Virtue-based pedagogies and value clarification approaches also show promise. Methodological heterogeneity, however, limits definitive comparisons. Conclusions: Character education programs in higher education can meaningfully contribute to moral development outcomes. Universities are encouraged to adopt evidence-based, holistic approaches that are culturally responsive, actively engaging, and systematically evaluated.

*Keywords:* character education, higher education, moral development, virtue education, systematic review, ethical decision-making

## 1. Introduction

Higher education institutions have traditionally focused on developing students' intellectual capacities and professional competencies. However, there is growing recognition that universities also bear a crucial responsibility in shaping students' moral character, ethical reasoning, and value systems (Wang et al., 2026; Stanton, 2022). In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, graduates face ethical dilemmas in professional practice, civic engagement, and personal life that require well-developed moral reasoning capabilities and strong character foundations (Kaj, 2025).

Character education in higher education encompasses a range of pedagogical approaches aimed at fostering moral development, including explicit ethics curricula, values clarification exercises, service-learning experiences, virtue-based pedagogies, and integrated character formation programs (Chaoui et al., 2025). These interventions draw on diverse theoretical frameworks, most notably Kohlberg's stages of moral development, virtue ethics, and contemporary character education models (Esquerda et al., 2019; Shaheen, 2025).

The question of whether character can be taught and whether university programs genuinely shape students' moral dispositions has been debated extensively in educational scholarship (Parks-Leduc & Mulligan, 2019).

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Despite increasing institutional investment in character education, empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of various approaches remains scattered across disciplines, contexts, and methodological traditions. Prior systematic attention has concentrated primarily on K-12 settings, leaving higher education relatively underexplored (Heemal et al., 2024). Furthermore, the diversity of intervention types, outcome measures, and study designs has made it difficult to synthesize evidence and identify best practices (Posada & R., 2025).

Understanding which character education approaches effectively promote moral development in university students is essential for evidence-based educational policy and practice. Stakeholders, including students, institutions, employers, and society, have legitimate interests in knowing whether these programs achieve their intended outcomes (Putter et al., 2022; Kim, 2025). This systematic review was conducted to fill that gap.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Theoretical Foundations of Character Education

Character education as a field draws from multiple philosophical and psychological traditions. Aristotle's virtue ethics, which holds that character is cultivated through habitual moral practice rather than inherited or passively received, has significantly influenced contemporary approaches (Stanton, 2022). Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development, which describes a progression from pre-conventional through conventional to post-conventional moral reasoning, has provided the dominant framework for empirical research in moral development (Esquerda et al., 2019; Shaheen, 2025).

Contemporary character education models have expanded beyond cognitive moral reasoning to encompass affective dimensions (moral emotions, empathy, compassion) and behavioral dimensions (moral action, virtue habits). Integrated models that address the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of character, sometimes described as "head, heart, and hands" approaches, have gained traction in recent years (Wang et al., 2026). This holistic orientation reflects a growing consensus that genuine moral development requires not only knowledge of ethical principles but also the emotional motivation and behavioral capacity to act on them.

### 2.2. Character Education in Higher Education Contexts

Universities occupy a unique position in moral formation. Unlike primary and secondary schooling, higher education is often the last structured educational environment students encounter before entering professional and civic life. Several scholars have argued that universities inevitably shape character—through disciplinary cultures, institutional norms, pedagogical choices, and co-curricular opportunities—and that this influence should be exercised intentionally and critically (Stanton, 2022; Begley et al., 2019).

The types of character education interventions in higher education vary considerably. Formal ethics courses and bioethics curricula have a long history in professional education programs, particularly in medicine, nursing, pharmacy, and business (Esquerda et al., 2019; Hijazeen et al., 2022; Khatiban et al., 2019). Service-learning programs, which integrate community engagement with academic coursework and structured reflection, have emerged as particularly promising vehicles for moral development (Cobo, 2022). Problem-based learning approaches, role-play simulations, and value clarification exercises represent additional

pedagogical strategies with evidence of effectiveness in specific contexts (Khatiban et al., 2019; Demircan et al., 2025; Sukisno & Supiana Dian, 2024).

2.3.Gaps in the Evidence Base

Despite the growing body of literature, several important gaps remain. Much of the existing research relies on cross-sectional designs that limit causal inference. Outcome measures are highly heterogeneous, making cross-study comparisons difficult. Few studies include long-term follow-up to assess the durability of moral development gains beyond the immediate intervention period. Additionally, the majority of studies have been conducted in Western, English-language contexts, with less systematic attention to diverse cultural settings where character education traditions and moral frameworks may differ substantially (Wang et al., 2026; Rusli et al., 2019).

This systematic review was designed to address these gaps by synthesizing evidence across diverse contexts, intervention types, and disciplinary settings, and by identifying methodological strengths and weaknesses in the extant literature.

## 3. Methodology

3.1. Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across four databases: SciSpace (2 queries), SciSpace Full Text (2 queries), Google Scholar (2 queries with auto-pagination), and PubMed (2 queries using advanced search syntax). No date restrictions were applied to ensure comprehensive coverage of the literature. The search was conducted in April 20th, 2026.

Search terms combined controlled vocabulary and free-text terms related to character education, moral development, values education, virtue education, and higher education. Representative search strings included:

1. Google Scholar: ("character education" OR "moral development" OR "values education" OR "ethical education" OR "virtue education" OR "character formation") AND (university OR "higher education" OR college OR undergraduate) AND ("moral reasoning" OR "ethical decision-making" OR "character development" OR "values formation") AND (program OR intervention OR curriculum)
2. PubMed: ("character education"[Title/Abstract] OR "moral development"[Title/Abstract] OR "values education"[Title/Abstract]) AND (university[Title/Abstract] OR "higher education"[Title/Abstract]) AND ("moral reasoning"[Title/Abstract] OR "ethical decision-making"[Title/Abstract])

The search identified a total of 548 records: SciSpace (200), SciSpace Full Text (200), Google Scholar (134), and PubMed (14).

3.2. Eligibility Criteria

Studies were screened against six predefined eligibility criteria:

**Inclusion criteria:** (1) The study focused on individuals enrolled in higher education settings, including undergraduate, graduate, or professional degree programs; (2) The intervention consisted specifically of character education programs, moral development curricula, values education, or virtue-based ethical training; (3) The study measured specific developmental changes in moral reasoning, ethical decision-making, character formation, or personal value systems.

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**Exclusion criteria:** (4) The target population comprised primary or secondary school (K-12) students or the general adult population outside academic institutions; (5) The study focused solely on professional or technical skill acquisition without an explicit moral, virtue, or character-building framework; (6) The study evaluated general academic performance or student satisfaction without assessing moral or ethical growth markers.

### 3.3. Screening Process

The screening followed a two-stage PRISMA-compliant process. Following deduplication and AI-powered relevance ranking, 100 unique records underwent abstract screening, each evaluated against all six criteria on a 0–5 scale. Papers scoring ≥4.0 proceeded to full-text assessment. At the full-text stage, a more stringent threshold of ≥4.5 was applied.

Abstract screening: 100 papers screened; 38 included (score ≥4.0); 62 excluded. Primary reasons for exclusion: non-higher education settings (n=25), lack of specific moral assessment (n=20), purely professional/technical skill training (n=17).

Full-text screening: 38 papers assessed; 35 included (score ≥4.5); 3 excluded. Primary reasons for exclusion: did not meet comparative or longitudinal design criteria (n=2), insufficient focus on structured character intervention (n=1).

### 3.4. Data Extraction

Data extraction was conducted systematically on all 35 included studies using a standardized framework covering: (1) study design and methodology; (2) character education intervention type and theoretical framework; (3) sample size and population characteristics; (4) outcome measures and instruments; (5) key findings and effect sizes; and (6) limitations and threats to validity.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1.Study Selection

The complete study selection process is represented in Figure 1 (PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram). From 548 initial records, 118 duplicates were removed, 62 records were excluded at abstract screening, and 3 were excluded at full-text assessment. A total of 35 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis.

### 4.2.Study Characteristics

**Study designs.** The included studies represented diverse methodological approaches: quasi-experimental studies (n=7), cross-sectional studies (n=8), longitudinal studies (n=4), systematic reviews and literature reviews (n=5), mixed-methods and qualitative studies (n=6), and theoretical/conceptual papers (n=5).

**Intervention types.** Character education interventions in the included studies spanned eight categories: ethics curricula and courses (n=8), integrated character education models (n=6), virtue-based pedagogies (n=4), mixed-methods explorations of moral development (n=6), service-learning programs (n=2), problem-based learning (n=2), value clarification techniques (n=1), and liberal arts education approaches (n=1).

**Populations.** Studies were conducted across diverse disciplinary contexts, including pharmacy (n=2), nursing (n=2), medical education (n=1), business (n=2), military/leadership (n=1), liberal arts (n=1), and general higher education contexts (n=20). Sample sizes ranged from small qualitative samples (<50 participants) to large cross-sectional surveys (>200 participants). Geographic representation was broad,

including the United States, Spain, Turkey, Indonesia, China, Iran, South Africa, and multiple Latin American countries.

**Outcome measures.** Instruments for assessing moral development included Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Interview and Neo-Kohlbergian tools (n=5), scenario-based ethical decision-making assessments, self-report values questionnaires, character strength scales, behavioral and attitudinal measures (e.g., prosocial behavior, anti-corruption attitudes), and qualitative methods such as interviews and reflective essays.

4.3.Synthesis of Evidence

**Service-learning.** Two studies provided direct evidence of service-learning effects (Cobo, 2020; 2022). Both found significant gains in moral reasoning associated with service-learning participation, particularly in the transition from conventional to post-conventional moral reasoning stages. The combination of experiential community engagement and structured reflection appeared to be the key mechanism through which moral growth was fostered.

**Ethics curricula and problem-based learning.** Studies of formal ethics education yielded mixed but generally positive findings. In pharmacy education, multi-year ethics curricula were associated with moral development across different stages of training (Hijazeen et al., 2022; H. RA et al., n.d.). In nursing education, problem-based learning demonstrated clear advantages over traditional lecture-based ethics instruction, with students in PBL groups showing greater improvements in ethical decision-making and motivation (Khatiban et al., 2019). Video-supported role-play also showed promise for nursing students (Demircan et al., 2025). In business education, distributed ethical training programs positively influenced ethical decision-making, with individual characteristics moderating outcomes (Parks-Leduc & Mulligan, 2019).

**Integrated character education models.** Studies examining comprehensive institutional approaches found that integrating moral development across curricula, co-curricular activities, and institutional culture produced more sustainable character formation than isolated interventions. An "integrative head-heart-hands" model in Chinese higher education showed evidence of holistic moral development (Wang et al., 2026). Studies from Indonesia described character education programs emphasizing integrity, local wisdom, and comprehensive formation approaches with varying degrees of empirical support (Heemal et al., 2024; Muhitdinov et al., 2023; Yaqin & Yaqin, 2024).

**Value clarification techniques.** A study by Sukisno and Supiana Dian (2024) found that value clarification learning—particularly when accounting for students' locus of control—could positively influence moral development levels, suggesting that individually tailored approaches may enhance intervention effectiveness.

**Virtue-based pedagogies.** Studies in this category found that explicit cultivation of character strengths and practical wisdom (phronesis) was associated with positive academic and personal outcomes in undergraduate students (Villanueva et al., 2021). A character education program targeting wisdom, academic hope, and prosocial behavior demonstrated effectiveness in an Iranian higher education context (Zahra et al., 2025). Theoretical and conceptual papers argued compellingly that universities have both the capacity and the obligation to cultivate virtue intentionally (Stanton, 2022; Begley et al., 2019).

**Longitudinal and developmental trajectories.** Longitudinal studies provided evidence that moral reasoning continues to develop during the university years, though isolating the specific contribution of character education programs from the general effects of university attendance remains methodologically challenging (Hodge et al., 2020). Studies comparing students at different stages of study generally found moral development progression across years of higher education, consistent with Kohlberg's developmental framework (Shaheen, 2025).

**Cultural considerations.** Studies conducted across diverse international contexts highlighted the critical importance of cultural adaptation. Programs integrating local cultural values and wisdom traditions—such as Indonesian local wisdom (Rusli et al., 2019) and African Ubuntu ethical frameworks (Putter et al., 2022)—appeared more contextually effective than decontextualized universal approaches. At the same time, core developmental principles, such as progression toward post-conventional moral reasoning, appeared to transcend cultural boundaries.

**Moderating factors.** Several studies identified factors moderating intervention effectiveness. Individual student characteristics—including prior moral development level, locus of control, and personal motivation—influenced responsiveness to character education programs (Parks-Leduc & Mulligan, 2019; Sukisno & Supiana Dian, 2024). Implementation quality factors, including instructor expertise, pedagogical fidelity, and depth of reflective integration, also emerged as important determinants of effectiveness (Khatiban et al., 2019; Begley et al., 2019).

### 4.4.Limitations of the Evidence Base

Despite generally positive findings, the evidence base is constrained by several important methodological limitations. First, the predominance of quasi-experimental and cross-sectional designs without randomization limits causal inference regarding intervention effects. Second, heterogeneity in outcome measures—many of which are self-report instruments susceptible to social desirability bias—makes cross-study comparisons difficult. Third, few studies include follow-up assessments beyond the immediate post-intervention period, leaving questions about the durability of moral development gains unanswered. Fourth, many interventions were highly context-specific, raising legitimate questions about transferability across institutions, disciplines, and cultures. Finally, publication bias likely means the literature over-represents positive findings.

## 5. Conclusion

This systematic review provides evidence that character education programs in higher education can contribute meaningfully to moral development outcomes in university students. Thirty-five included studies, representing diverse international contexts, disciplinary settings, and methodological approaches, converge on several key conclusions.

Service-learning programs and problem-based ethics education demonstrate particularly strong potential for promoting moral reasoning, with experiential engagement and structured reflection emerging as core mechanisms of moral growth. Integrated, holistic character education models that embed moral development across the curriculum and institutional culture appear more effective and durable than isolated, single-course interventions. Virtue-based pedagogies that cultivate specific character strengths and practical wisdom contribute to positive moral and academic outcomes. Across all intervention types, implementation quality—

including pedagogical approach, instructor expertise, and cultural responsiveness—matters as much as intervention design.

**Implications for practice.** Universities seeking to cultivate ethical competence should implement evidence-based character education programs, prioritize active and experiential pedagogies over passive instruction, adopt integrated institutional approaches, invest in faculty development for character education, and systematically evaluate program effectiveness using validated instruments.

**Implications for research.** Future research should employ more rigorous experimental designs, use standardized outcome measures to enable meta-analysis, include long-term follow-up, investigate mechanisms of moral change, and conduct studies in diverse international contexts to generate globally applicable knowledge. Prospective study registration and transparent reporting of null results would strengthen the evidence base considerably.

Character education in higher education represents both an important moral imperative and an empirically tractable research domain. The evidence reviewed here provides a foundation for evidence-based practice, while the identified gaps underscore the substantial work still needed to fully understand how universities can most effectively foster moral development in the students they serve.

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