

General Studies Courses and Student Identity Formation in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.910000014>

Received: 28 September 2025; Accepted: 03 October 2025; Published: 01 November 2025

ABSTRACT

The formation of student identity plays a crucial role in achieving Malaysia's national aspiration of producing citizens who are patriotic, competitive, and progressive. Within this context, the implementation of General Studies courses (Mata Pelajaran Umum, MPU) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) serves as an important initiative to cultivate values, ethics, and a strong sense of national identity among students. Despite these intentions, MPU courses are often perceived by students as less relevant or unnecessarily burdensome, primarily due to the heavy academic workload and the prioritization of discipline-specific subjects. This study aims to explore the contribution of MPU courses to student identity formation and to analyze their relevance within the broader framework of higher education in Malaysia. Employing a document analysis approach, the study examines the official MPU guidelines issued by the Ministry of Higher Education as well as existing scholarly literature on identity development in higher education. The findings suggest that MPU courses have the potential to produce holistic graduates who possess a strong identity rooted in their religion, cultural heritage, moral values, and Malaysian national identity. Furthermore, these courses play a significant role in supporting the National Education Philosophy, which aspires to nurture balanced individuals across physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions (JERI). By embedding both universal and local values, MPU courses offer students an opportunity to develop a more integrated worldview that aligns with national priorities and global competencies. Therefore, the continuation and enhancement of MPU courses remain essential in ensuring that HEIs not only produce technically skilled graduates but also individuals with strong character, civic responsibility, and a sense of national belonging.

Keywords - General Studies Courses, Student Identity Formation, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), National Education Philosophy, Holistic Student Development, Malaysian Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Student identity formation has become a central focus in higher education, particularly in societies that seek to cultivate graduates who are not only academically competent but also socially responsible and nationally conscious. In Malaysia, the National Education Philosophy emphasizes the balanced development of students in terms of physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions (JERI). In line with this philosophy, the implementation of General Studies courses (Mata Pelajaran Umum, MPU) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) represents a deliberate effort to instill values, ethics, and a sense of national identity among undergraduates.

Despite the clear objectives, MPU courses have been the subject of debate. Some students and academics

perceive these courses as redundant or burdensome, given the already heavy academic workload and the emphasis on discipline-specific subjects. Critics argue that students should be allowed to concentrate solely on professional or technical areas that directly contribute to their chosen career paths. Nevertheless, advocates of MPU highlight its vital role in nurturing holistic graduates who embody the principles of patriotism, civic responsibility, and moral integrity.

This paper argues that MPU courses are essential in shaping well-rounded graduates capable of contributing positively to the nation. By examining official guidelines from the Ministry of Higher Education and relevant literature, this study seeks to clarify how MPU supports identity formation and addresses misconceptions surrounding its value. In doing so, it contributes to the ongoing discussion on curriculum design and the broader role of higher education in nation-building.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of higher education in shaping student identity has been widely discussed in educational research. Identity formation is not only associated with academic learning but also with the inculcation of values, ethics, and national consciousness (Erikson, 1968; Luyckx et al., 2013). In Malaysia, this aspiration is closely aligned with the Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan (National Education Philosophy), which emphasizes a holistic development that balances intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical aspects (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013).

General Studies and Holistic Education

General Studies courses, locally known as Mata Pelajaran Umum (MPU), were introduced to strengthen the nation's higher education framework by embedding identity and moral values into the curriculum. These courses aim to cultivate critical thinking, civic responsibility, and social awareness, thereby producing graduates who are not only technically proficient but also holistic individuals (Ahmad, Halim, & Mansor, 2019). Empirical findings suggest that students exposed to MPU courses display stronger appreciation for cultural heritage and unity (Ismail & Hassan, 2020).

Challenges and Perceptions of MPU Courses

Despite their intended benefits, many students perceive MPU courses as an academic burden. Studies indicate that students often prioritize discipline-specific subjects and view MPU as irrelevant to their career preparation (Nor & Nordin, 2018; Rahman, 2017). However, other research highlights that MPU fosters essential soft skills, values, and broader identity development, which outweigh the immediate workload challenges (Salleh, 2021).

Identity Formation in Higher Education

Social, cultural, and institutional factors shape identity formation. Universities, as social institutions, are responsible for nurturing values such as patriotism, integrity, and ethical responsibility among students (Arnett, 2000). Within Malaysia, MPU serves as a structured platform for embedding these values, thereby aligning with global educational objectives where higher education institutions function as agents of nation-building and moral development (UNESCO, 2015).

The overall literature review underscores that General Studies (MPU) plays a pivotal role in shaping student identity within Malaysian higher education, despite ongoing challenges in perception and implementation. While universities are entrusted with fostering not only academic excellence but also values, ethics, and national consciousness, MPU emerges as a key mechanism to operationalize this responsibility, aligning with the National Education Philosophy's holistic vision. Empirical evidence affirms MPU's contribution to cultivating cultural appreciation, unity, and civic responsibility, yet student resistance-stemming from a preference for discipline-specific courses-poses a barrier to its acceptance. Nevertheless, the long-term benefits of MPU, particularly in enhancing soft skills, ethical grounding, and national identity, outweigh these short-term challenges, positioning MPU as a critical platform for nation-building and holistic graduate development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts qualitative research design with a document analysis approach. The focus is on exploring how General Studies courses (Mata Pelajaran Umum, MPU) contribute to student identity formation within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia. Document analysis is appropriate because it allows for a systematic review and interpretation of policy documents, guidelines, and relevant academic literature.

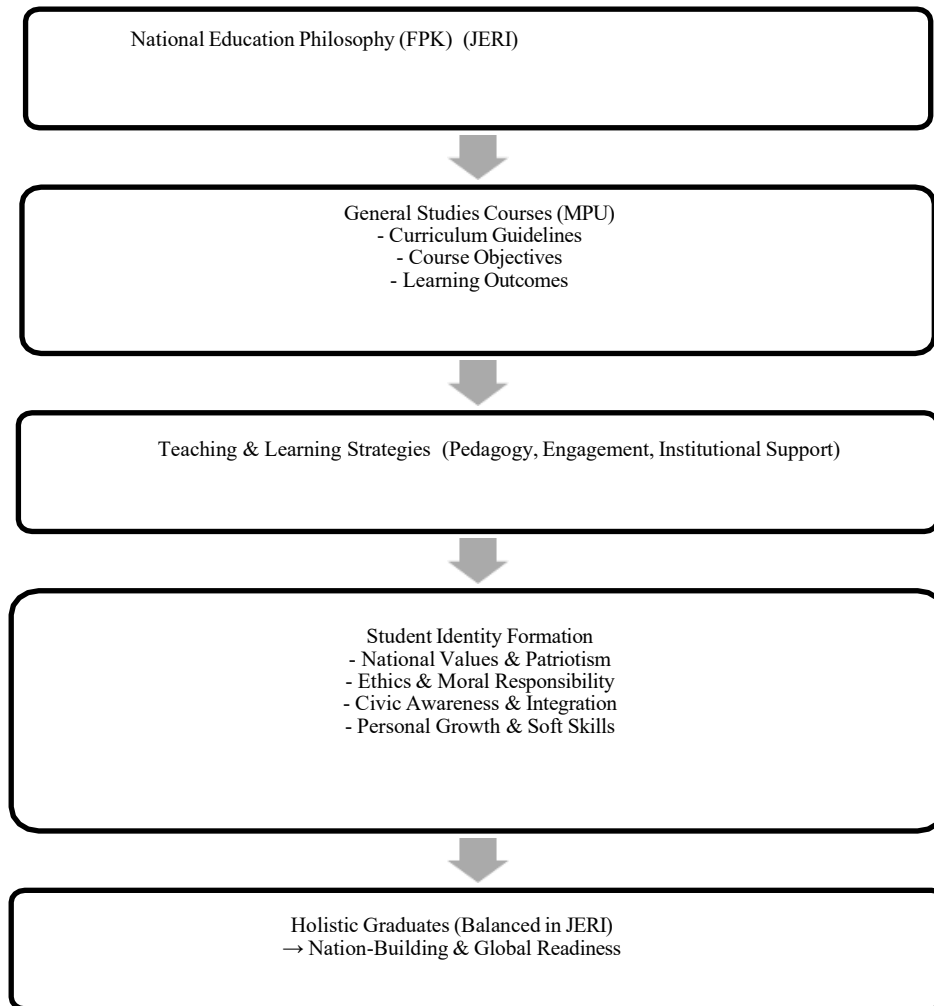


Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework: General Studies Courses and Student

Identity Formation

The primary source of data is the General Studies Course Guidelines (MPU) issued by the Ministry of Higher Education. This document provides the official framework, objectives, and expected outcomes of MPU courses. In addition, scholarly articles, books, and research papers related to student identity formation, holistic education, and the role of General Studies in higher education were reviewed to provide theoretical and contextual support.

Data collection based on relevant documents was identified through purposeful selection. The selection criteria included:

1. Policy documents and guidelines related to MPU are issued by the government or educational authorities.
2. Peer-reviewed articles and scholarly works addressing identity formation, national education philosophy, and holistic student development in higher education.
3. Literature published between 2000 and 2025 to capture both historical and contemporary perspectives.

The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Key themes were identified and categorized under three broad dimensions:

1. The role of MPU in holistic student development.
2. Challenges and perceptions of MPU courses.
3. Contribution of MPU to national identity formation.

Patterns, similarities, and contradictions across the documents were examined to understand the extent to which MPU supports the National Education Philosophy and contributes to the production of well-rounded graduates. To enhance credibility, multiple sources of evidence were reviewed and triangulated. Official guidelines were cross-referenced with scholarly findings to ensure consistency and reliability of interpretation. Additionally, peer-reviewed literature was prioritized to maintain academic rigor.

The framework illustrates how General Studies courses (MPU) function as a key input in shaping student identity formation, guided by the National Education Philosophy (Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan, FPK).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings affirm the central issue raised in the abstract: General Studies (MPU) courses are simultaneously perceived as burdensome by students yet remain vital in shaping student identity and producing holistic graduates in line with Malaysia's National Education Philosophy (JERI). While many students question their relevance compared to discipline-specific courses, the evidence shows that MPU contributes significantly to instilling values, ethics, civic responsibility, and national identity. This highlights a persistent tension between student perceptions and the broader goals of higher education policy.

In line with the research objectives, the findings demonstrate that MPU fulfills its intended roles of identity formation and holistic student development. The courses not only encourage critical thinking, leadership, and teamwork but also strengthen appreciation of cultural heritage and unity in a multicultural context. Although the objectives are achieved conceptually, the degree of success depends heavily on how the courses are delivered. This suggests that curriculum alignment and pedagogical innovation are necessary to make MPU more engaging and relevant to students' academic and professional trajectories.

The findings also correspond closely with the literature review, which emphasized both the positive contributions and the challenges associated with MPU. On one hand, MPU is validated as a nation-building tool that fosters patriotism, unity, and ethical responsibility, consistent with prior studies. On the other hand, concerns about its perceived irrelevance and workload burden are echoed, demonstrating a clear disconnect between policy intentions and student attitudes. The results therefore mirror the contradictions highlighted in existing research, underscoring the need for more effective communication and integration of MPU into the overall student learning experience.

Finally, the methodology, which relied on qualitative document analysis, provided a credible basis for interpreting the role of MPU. Triangulation of official guidelines with scholarly works strengthened the reliability of findings, showing MPU's strategic contribution to student identity and holistic development. Nevertheless, the absence of direct student perspectives limits the depth of understanding, as it does not fully capture students lived experiences. This highlights the importance of future research incorporating empirical methods, such as surveys, interviews, or focus groups, to provide a more comprehensive and student-centered perspective, ultimately enhancing the impact and acceptance of MPU in higher education.

Research Findings	Analysis
MPU contributes significantly to national identity and holistic development (JERI dimensions), even if student perceptions are negative.	The abstract highlights the tension between perception and purpose : while students see MPU as a burden, policy frames it as necessary for nation-building.

MPU strengthens student identity through values, ethics, and cultural awareness, while also contributing to holistic skills such as leadership and critical thinking.	The findings confirm that objectives are met: MPU does influence identity and holistic growth, though effectiveness depends on pedagogical delivery and student engagement.
Findings show MPU creates long-term benefits (soft skills, civic awareness) even if short-term student acceptance is low. MPU is validated as a key tool for national identity formation.	Literature's contradictions are reflected in the findings: positive outcomes exist , but student perceptions remain a challenge. The results reinforce global educational roles of universities as agents of civic and moral development.
Findings derived from official policy documents and academic studies confirm MPU's role in identity formation but also expose gaps in perception and implementation.	The methodology ensures policy–scholarship triangulation but lacks direct student voices. Findings are reliable but suggest the need for future empirical (survey/interview) validation.

Table 1: Research Findings Analysis Table

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study affirm that General Studies (MPU) courses remain a vital instrument for shaping student identity and fostering holistic development in Malaysian higher education, despite persistent perceptions of them as burdensome or irrelevant. Consistent with the *Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan*, MPU contributes to instilling values, ethics, civic responsibility, and cultural appreciation, thereby preparing graduates who are balanced in intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical dimensions. However, the study also highlights a clear gap between policy intentions and student perceptions, echoing contradictions found in prior literature. While MPU is validated as a nation-building tool that strengthens patriotism and unity, negative attitudes among student's risk undermining its impact. This suggests that the challenge lies not in MPU's relevance but in its delivery and pedagogy, requiring more interactive, contextual, and student-centered approaches that connect MPU with employability and real- life applications. Although document analysis provided credible insights, the absence of direct student perspectives limits the depth of findings, pointing to the need for future research incorporating surveys and interviews. Overall, the discussion indicates that MPU must be retained but reformed, aligning policy aspirations with student experiences to ensure it fulfills its strategic role in producing holistic and globally competitive graduates.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that General Studies (MPU) courses are crucial in shaping student identity and holistic development within Malaysian higher education. Aligned with the *Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan*, MPU strengthens values, ethics, civic responsibility, and cultural appreciation, producing graduates who are balanced across intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical dimensions. However, negative perceptions among students—who often view MPU as irrelevant or burdensome—highlight a significant gap between policy intentions and lived experiences. The challenge lies less in the relevance of MPU and more in its delivery, pedagogy, and perceived value.

To address these issues, several recommendations are proposed. First, universities should adopt more innovative and student-centered teaching methods, including interactive, experiential, and problem-based learning, to make MPU more engaging and practical. Second, MPU content should be contextualized to contemporary issues and linked explicitly to employability skills, ensuring that students recognize its long-term value. Third, policymakers and educators should conduct awareness campaigns and dialogue sessions to improve student understanding of MPU's role in identity formation and nation-building. Finally, future research should incorporate empirical approaches such as surveys and interviews to capture student perspectives, enabling reforms that are both evidence-based and responsive to their needs. By implementing these strategies, MPU can

continue to serve as a cornerstone of Malaysia's higher education system while enhancing its acceptance and impact among students.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to sincerely thank the Kedah State Research Committee and UiTM Kedah Branch for their generous funding through the Tabung Penyelidikan Am. This support was instrumental in enabling the research and contributing to the successful publication of this article.

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