

Character Formation in Higher Education: Strengthening Individual Attitudes and Morals among Education Faculty Students

I Ketut Atmaja Johny Artha*, Tri 'Ulya Qodriyati., Widodo., Heryanto Susilo., Desika Putri Mardiani., Tisya Fajriatus Salim

Department of Nonformal Education, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Surabaya 60213, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Character formation is a central concern in higher education because universities are expected to develop students who are not only academically competent but also morally responsible in academic and social life. This study examines how student character is formed through the interconnected dimensions of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action within the campus ecosystem. A descriptive qualitative design with an interpretive thematic orientation was employed at the Faculty of Education, State University of Surabaya, Indonesia. Twenty-four participants, comprising 16 students, five lecturers, and three student-affairs personnel, were selected through purposive sampling with maximum variation. Data were collected over three months through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. The data were analysed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, while Lickona's framework was used as a sensitising analytical perspective. The findings generated four interrelated themes: moral knowing, moral feeling, moral action, and tensions between moral understanding and moral practice. Students developed an understanding of honesty, discipline, responsibility, social concern, communication ethics, and academic integrity through learning and institutional guidance. These values were internalised through lecturer role modelling, peer relationships, empathy, and collective experiences, and were enacted through responsible academic behaviour, cooperation, respectful communication, and participation in student activities. However, the transition from moral understanding to consistent action was influenced by peer norms, academic pressure, digital technology, personal convenience, and inconsistent habituation. The study contributes an ecosystem-based model showing that character formation emerges through the interaction of learning, lecturer role modelling, habituation, academic culture, peer interaction, and student activities. Universities should therefore integrate character development across curricula, teaching practices, academic-integrity policies, student mentoring, and responsible digital practices.

Keywords: character formation; moral knowing; moral feeling; moral action; higher education; campus ecosystem

INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a strategic role in developing students who are not only academically competent but also possess strong character (Arizona et al., 2025; Brooks & Harrison, 2024; Erdriani et al., 2026). Character education helps individuals understand moral values, develop concern for those values, and translate them into actual behavior (Jeynes, 2019; Trinidad et al., 2023). Values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, social concern, communication ethics, and academic integrity are therefore essential foundations for students' academic and social lives. Character formation in higher education does not occur solely through classroom instruction. It develops through learning experiences, lecturer role modeling, peer interaction, academic culture, habituation, and student activities. This view is consistent with Juvonen et al. (2012), who emphasize the importance of social relationships and extracurricular engagement in students' development. A supportive

campus environment can therefore function as a space in which students learn, internalize, and practice moral values through both academic and non-academic experiences (Asim et al., 2023; Fujiyama et al., 2021).

However, previous studies have often examined character education through separate values or settings, such as honesty, discipline, classroom learning, peer interaction, or extracurricular activities. Consequently, limited attention has been given to how these elements interact in everyday campus life and how students move from understanding moral values to consistently practicing them. This gap is increasingly important amid social and technological changes that influence students' communication, academic behavior, individualism, and ethical decision-making (Block & Estes, 2011; Burke & Larmar, 2021; Seijts et al., 2022). To address this issue, the present study applies Lickona's (1992) framework of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Moral knowing refers to students' understanding of moral values and ethical expectations. Moral feeling concerns conscience, empathy, concern for others, and commitment to moral values. Moral action refers to the actual expression of those values through responsible, disciplined, honest, and ethical behavior. Character formation is therefore considered incomplete when students merely understand moral principles without internalizing and practicing them.

In this study, moral knowing is reflected in students' understanding of honesty, discipline, responsibility, communication ethics, social concern, and academic integrity. Moral feeling is reflected in empathy, moral awareness, concern for peers, and commitment to shared academic values. Moral action is demonstrated through punctuality, responsible completion of assignments, avoidance of plagiarism, respectful communication, cooperation, participation in student activities, and responsible use of technology. The wider campus ecosystem, including learning, lecturer role modeling, habituation, social interaction, academic culture, and student involvement, shapes these dimensions. The Indonesian cultural context is also relevant because social and cultural values influence understandings of good character. In Indonesian higher education, character is commonly associated with discipline, respect, responsibility, cooperation, social concern, and collective responsibility. Local wisdom and culturally grounded educational practices may strengthen students' social and moral development (Hidayati et al., 2020; Muassomah et al., 2020). At the same time, cultural expectations may also create tensions. For example, respect for lecturers may support discipline but may influence students' willingness to express disagreement or discuss ethical problems openly.

Although previous research has highlighted the importance of learning, lecturer behavior, campus culture, peer relationships, and student activities, few studies have examined how these elements jointly support the development of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. There is also limited understanding of the tensions between students' knowledge of moral values and their actual behavior, particularly in relation to peer influence, digital technology, and academic demands. Therefore, this study investigates character formation among students at the Faculty of Education, State University of Surabaya. Its novelty lies in integrating Lickona's three dimensions of character with an ecosystem-based perspective to explain how academic and social experiences facilitate or constrain the translation of moral understanding into moral practice. The study aims to analyze how learning, lecturer role modeling, habituation, social interaction, academic culture, and student activities contribute to students' moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action.

The following research questions guide the study:

1. How does the campus ecosystem contribute to students' moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action?
2. What character values are understood, internalized, and practiced by students?
3. What obstacles affect the translation of moral understanding into consistent moral action?

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design with an interpretive thematic orientation to examine how student character was formed through academic and social experiences within the campus ecosystem. The study was conducted at the Faculty of Education, State University of Surabaya, Indonesia, over a period of

three months. A qualitative design was selected because the study sought to understand how students, lecturers, and student affairs personnel interpreted and experienced the processes through which moral values were understood, internalized, and enacted in everyday campus life. Participants were selected using purposive sampling with maximum variation. The selection criteria included direct involvement in academic learning, student development, student organizations, or character-building activities. The study involved 24 participants, consisting of 16 students, five lecturers, and three student-affairs personnel. The student participants represented different years of study and varied levels of involvement in student organizations. At the same time, the lecturers and student-affairs personnel were selected based on their roles in teaching, mentoring, and student development. This variation enabled the study to capture character formation from the perspectives of those who experienced, facilitated, and managed academic and student-development processes.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and explored participants' experiences and perceptions concerning honesty, discipline, responsibility, social concern, communication ethics, academic integrity, lecturer role modeling, peer interaction, student participation, and the use of digital technology in academic life. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To reduce socially desirable responses, participants were encouraged to describe concrete experiences, including situations in which their understanding of moral values did not always result in consistent moral behavior. Participant observations were conducted during lectures, group discussions, student–lecturer interactions, student-organizational activities, committee work, and social or community-service activities. The observations focused on behavioral expressions of discipline, responsibility, cooperation, respectful communication, social concern, and academic integrity. Document analysis included course syllabi, academic guidelines, attendance records, student activity reports, documentation of student programs, and available guidelines related to academic integrity and student conduct. These documents were used to identify institutional expectations and to corroborate evidence obtained from interviews and observations. The original manuscript had already identified interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis as the principal data sources; the revised method clarifies their procedures and analytical functions.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2020), comprising data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. The analysis began with repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary materials to develop familiarity with the data. Open coding was then conducted to identify values, actions, experiences, contextual influences, and tensions related to student character formation. Codes with similar meanings were grouped into broader categories and preliminary themes. Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively until thematic saturation was reached, as indicated by the recurrence of meanings and the absence of substantially new themes. Lickona's (1992) framework of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action was used as a sensitizing analytical framework during the interpretation stage. Moral knowing was used to examine students' understanding of moral values and ethical expectations. Moral feeling was used to interpret conscience, empathy, responsibility, concern for others, and commitment to moral values. Moral action was used to analyze the behavioral expression of these values in academic and social settings. The framework was not applied as a rigid predetermined classification. Themes concerning inconsistencies between moral understanding and actual behavior were retained as a distinct analytical category so that tensions within the character-formation process remained visible.

The trustworthiness of the findings was strengthened through source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, an analytical audit trail, and reflexive note-taking. Information obtained from students, lecturers, and student-affairs personnel was compared across participant groups and examined alongside observational and documentary evidence. Preliminary interpretations were discussed with selected participants to confirm that they accurately represented their experiences. Peer debriefing was used to review the coding process and thematic interpretations, while an audit trail documented analytical decisions throughout the study. Reflexive notes were maintained to identify assumptions that could influence the interpretation of the data. Ethical principles were maintained through institutional permission, informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymization. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, their right to decline to answer particular questions, and their

right to withdraw without academic or institutional consequences. Participant identities were replaced with codes in transcripts, analytical records, and the reporting of findings. All collected data were used exclusively for research purposes.

RESULT

The analysis generated four interrelated themes: moral knowing, moral feeling, moral action, and tensions between moral understanding and moral practice. These themes demonstrate that student character formation did not occur through a single activity but emerged from the interaction of learning, lecturer role modeling, habituation, peer relationships, academic culture, and student participation within the campus ecosystem.

Moral Knowing: Understanding Character Values and Academic Expectations

The first theme concerns students' understanding of the values and ethical expectations governing academic and social life. Interview data indicated that students recognized honesty, discipline, responsibility, social concern, communication ethics, cooperation, and academic integrity as important dimensions of good character. Their understanding was developed through classroom instruction, academic regulations, lecturer guidance, and repeated exposure to institutional expectations. Lecturers contributed to moral knowing by explaining standards related to attendance, punctuality, assignment completion, respectful communication, cooperation, and academic honesty. Academic guidelines, course syllabi, attendance records, and student-conduct expectations reinforced these values at the institutional level. The documentary evidence therefore showed that character education was not absent from the formal academic system, even when it was not always labeled explicitly as character education. Experiences outside the classroom also shaped students' moral knowing. Participation in student organizations, committee work, group assignments, and social activities enabled students to understand the practical meaning of responsibility, cooperation, leadership, and concern for others. These experiences helped students recognize that character values were not limited to individual behavior but also concerned their obligations toward peers, lecturers, and the wider academic community.

Moral Feeling: Internalizing Responsibility, Empathy, and Social Concern

The second theme relates to the affective internalization of character values. The findings indicated that students did not merely identify moral expectations cognitively; they also developed feelings of responsibility, empathy, concern for others, and commitment to collective academic values. These moral feelings emerged through interaction with lecturers, classmates, student organizations, and campus activities. Lecturer role modeling was particularly important in this process. Students observed how lecturers demonstrated discipline, fairness, responsibility, empathy, and consistency in their interactions. Such experiences encouraged students to perceive moral values not only as formal requirements but also as qualities embodied by respected academic figures. Fair treatment, timely feedback, respectful communication, and consistency between lecturers' words and actions strengthened students' appreciation of ethical conduct. Peer relationships and student activities also contributed to moral feeling. Group discussions, collaborative assignments, organizational activities, and community-service programs required students to consider other people's needs, listen to different opinions, share responsibilities, and respond to collective problems. These experiences supported the development of empathy, social awareness, and a sense of belonging to an academic community. However, the internalization of values was not equally strong among all students. The findings suggested that some students understood institutional expectations but had not yet developed a stable personal commitment to them. This condition became particularly visible when ethical behavior conflicted with convenience, peer habits, or academic pressure.

Moral Action: Enacting Character in Academic and Social Practices

The third theme concerns the behavioral expression of character. Observational data showed that moral action was reflected in students' attendance, punctuality, assignment completion, cooperation, ethical communication, participation in discussions, and involvement in student activities. Students demonstrated responsibility by

fulfilling assigned roles, completing academic tasks, contributing to group work, and participating in collective activities.

Academic honesty was expressed through efforts to complete assignments responsibly and avoid plagiarism. Discipline was visible in regular attendance, punctuality, and adherence to classroom procedures. Communication ethics appeared in the ways students addressed lecturers, responded to peers, expressed disagreement, and participated in group discussions. Cooperation and social concern were evident in collaborative learning, student organizations, committee work, and social or community service activities. The findings further indicated that repeated practice was central to the development of moral action. Values became more visible when students encountered recurring opportunities to exercise responsibility, cooperation, discipline, and ethical communication. Habituation therefore served as a bridge between understanding moral values and demonstrating them consistently in behavior. Student activities provided especially important opportunities for moral action because they placed students in situations requiring leadership, decision-making, conflict resolution, and collective responsibility. In these settings, students had to negotiate differences, meet deadlines, divide tasks, and respond to the consequences of their decisions. Character formation therefore developed through active participation rather than through moral instruction alone.

Tensions between Moral Understanding and Moral Practice

The fourth theme reveals that the transition from moral knowing and moral feeling to moral action was not always consistent. Although students generally understood the importance of honesty, discipline, responsibility, and communication ethics, these values were not always fully reflected in their daily behavior. One tension concerned discipline. Students understood the importance of punctuality and regular participation, yet the observations and interview accounts indicated that consistency varied across individuals and situations. Personal routines, peer influence, competing activities, and academic demands could weaken the application of values that students already recognized. A similar tension appeared in academic integrity. Digital technology provided students with greater access to information and learning resources, but it also made it easier to complete tasks through highly practical means. The use of online materials and artificial intelligence-based applications created uncertainty about the boundaries between legitimate academic assistance and excessive dependence. Some students recognized the importance of originality and personal responsibility but still struggled to apply these values consistently when dealing with demanding assignments or limited time. Peer influence could function both positively and negatively. Supportive peers encouraged responsibility, cooperation, and participation, whereas permissive group norms could normalize lateness, unequal task distribution, or shortcuts in completing academic work. These findings show that character formation was shaped not only by individual knowledge and intention but also by social expectations and situational pressures. The tension between moral understanding and moral practice did not indicate that character education had failed. Rather, it demonstrated that character formation was a continuing and negotiated process. Students' behavior depended on the interaction of personal commitment, lecturer examples, peer relationships, institutional expectations, habituation, and the practical challenges they encountered in academic life.

Integration of the Findings

Overall, the findings indicate that the campus functioned as a character-formation ecosystem. Learning and institutional guidelines primarily strengthened moral knowing; lecturer role modeling and social relationships supported moral feeling; and habituation, academic participation, and student activities provided opportunities for moral action. Nevertheless, the movement across these dimensions was influenced by peer norms, digital technology, academic pressure, and the consistency of institutional practices. The relationship among these themes is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic Findings on Student Character Formation

Analytical theme	Main findings	Main supporting sources
Moral	Students understood honesty, discipline, responsibility, communication ethics, cooperation, social concern, and academic integrity through	Interviews,

knowing	learning, lecturer guidance, academic rules, and student experiences.	documents
Moral feeling	Lecturer role modeling, peer interaction, and collective activities supported empathy, responsibility, moral awareness, concern for others, and commitment to shared values.	Interviews, observations
Moral action	Character values were enacted through punctuality, attendance, assignment completion, respectful communication, cooperation, organizational participation, and social activities.	Observations, interviews, documents
Knowing–action tensions	Students did not always consistently translate moral understanding into behavior because of peer influence, convenience, academic pressure, digital technology, and inconsistent habituation.	Interviews, observations

The original version of the article organized the findings primarily by data source—interviews, observations, and documentation—and reported that these sources produced relatively consistent evidence. In the revised structure, the same evidence is reorganized into analytical themes so that the relationship between the empirical findings and Lickona’s framework becomes more explicit. Figure 1 should therefore be revised to present the following relationship:

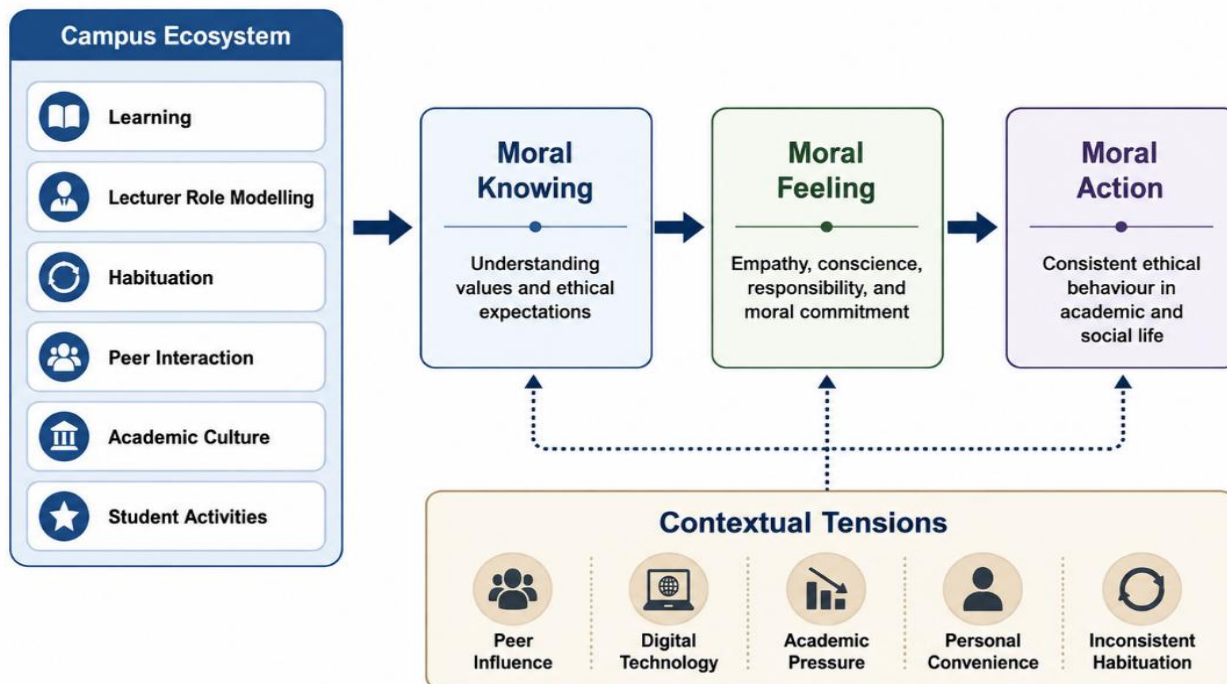


Figure 1. Ecosystem-Based Model of Student Character Formation

DISCUSSION

From Moral Knowing to Moral Action: Character Formation as an Integrated Process

The findings show that student character formation involves an interconnected movement from moral understanding to moral commitment and ethical practice. This process is consistent with Lickona’s (1992) framework, which conceptualizes character through moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Students first developed moral knowing by recognizing honesty, discipline, responsibility, social concern, communication ethics, and academic integrity as important values in university life. However, knowledge of these values did not automatically lead to consistent behavior. Moral values became more influential when they were accompanied by empathy, conscience, a sense of responsibility, and personal commitment. Moral feeling therefore functioned as an important bridge between understanding and action. Students were more

likely to practice responsibility, cooperation, and respectful communication when moral expectations were experienced not merely as institutional rules but as personally meaningful commitments. This supports the view that character education cannot be limited to transmitting moral concepts. It must also provide opportunities for students to reflect on the consequences of their actions, understand others' perspectives, and develop emotional commitment to shared academic values.

Moral commitment is strengthened when values such as honesty, responsibility, openness, and concern for others are experienced through meaningful social relationships. In a different social context, Qodriyati et al. (2025) similarly demonstrated that honesty, open communication, social support, and role responsibility contributed to resilience and relational stability. This suggests that moral values become more influential when they are internalised and consistently enacted within everyday relationships. Moral action was visible through punctuality, responsible completion of assignments, participation in group activities, ethical communication, cooperation, and efforts to maintain academic integrity. These behaviors indicate that character was expressed through everyday academic practices rather than through abstract moral statements alone. The findings support Lickona's argument that character becomes complete when moral knowledge and moral feeling are translated into consistent action. Nevertheless, the transition among the three dimensions was not entirely linear. Students could understand a value and express agreement with it while still applying it inconsistently under particular social or academic pressures. This finding extends previous discussions of character education in higher education by showing that knowing, feeling, and acting should not be treated as separate outcomes. Character formation is better understood as a relational process in which cognitive understanding, affective commitment, and repeated practice continually influence one another. This interpretation is consistent with the broader purpose of higher education as a space for developing not only academic competence but also ethical responsibility and socially accountable behavior (Arthur, 2024; Jeynes, 2019; Trinidad et al., 2023).

The Campus as a Moral Ecosystem

The study further demonstrates that the interaction of learning, lecturer role modeling, habituation, peer relationships, academic culture, and student activities shaped character formation. These elements did not operate independently. Instead, they formed a campus ecosystem in which students encountered values through formal instruction, institutional expectations, interpersonal relationships, and repeated social practices. This ecosystem-based interpretation is supported by Artha et al. (2025), who showed that students' active participation, reflective thinking, creativity, and involvement in academic and organisational activities contribute to a collaborative and participatory academic environment. This indicates that students are not merely recipients of institutional culture but also active participants who shape the academic and social ecosystem in which character formation occurs. Learning contributed primarily to moral knowing by introducing students to academic expectations and the meaning of values such as honesty, responsibility, and discipline. However, the influence of learning depended on how these values were enacted within academic relationships. Lecturer role modeling was particularly important because students observed how lecturers demonstrated fairness, punctuality, responsibility, empathy, and consistency. This finding supports previous studies showing that educators influence students not only through explicit instruction but also through their conduct and relationships with students (Alazmi & Alazmi, 2020; Cojocariu & Mareş, 2022).

Lecturer role modeling also strengthened moral feeling. When lecturers treated students fairly, communicated respectfully, and demonstrated consistency between stated expectations and personal behavior, students were more likely to regard ethical conduct as credible and meaningful. In this sense, lecturers acted not only as sources of academic knowledge but also as moral references within the campus environment. Conversely, inconsistency between institutional messages and the behavior of academic figures could weaken students' commitment to those values. Habituation played a central role in transforming moral understanding into moral action. Repeated experiences of attending classes on time, completing assignments responsibly, cooperating in groups, and communicating respectfully enabled students to practice character values in concrete situations. This process supports the idea that character is strengthened through repeated ethical practice rather than through occasional moral instruction. Institutional routines, therefore, can function as mechanisms of character formation when they are applied consistently and accompanied by meaningful explanation.

Peer interaction and student activities also formed important parts of the moral ecosystem. Through group assignments, student organizations, committee work, and community activities, students encountered situations requiring cooperation, leadership, negotiation, conflict resolution, and collective responsibility. These experiences enabled students to test moral values in situations where individual preferences had to be balanced with group needs. This finding is consistent with studies demonstrating the importance of peer relationships and extracurricular participation in students' academic and social development (Juvonen et al., 2012; Fujiyama et al., 2021; Kang et al., 2025). Student activities should therefore not be regarded merely as supplementary programs. They function as practical environments in which students learn to assume responsibility, respond to differences, manage collective tasks, and experience the consequences of their decisions. This supports the holistic character-education framework proposed by The Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues and the Oxford Character Project (2020), which positions institutional culture, social relationships, and student experiences as integral components of university character education.

Tensions between Moral Understanding and Moral Practice

A significant contribution of this study lies in identifying tensions between students' knowledge of moral values and their actual behavior. The findings show that students generally understood the importance of honesty, discipline, responsibility, and ethical communication. However, their actions were influenced by peer norms, academic pressure, personal convenience, digital technology, and habitual consistency. The gap between moral knowing and moral action was particularly visible in relation to discipline and academic responsibility. Students could recognize punctuality and timely task completion as important but still apply these values inconsistently when confronted with competing activities or demanding academic workloads. This suggests that inconsistency should not be interpreted simply as a lack of moral knowledge. It may also reflect weaknesses in self-regulation, habituation, social support, or institutional consistency.

Peer influence created both supportive and constraining effects. Positive peer norms encouraged students to fulfill responsibilities, participate in collective activities, and maintain cooperation. However, permissive peer environments could normalize lateness, unequal task distribution, or shortcuts in academic work. This finding illustrates that character is socially negotiated. Students' ethical choices are shaped not only by individual convictions but also by what is accepted, rewarded, or tolerated within their immediate social groups. Digital technology introduced another important tension. Access to digital resources and artificial intelligence-based applications can improve learning efficiency, but it may also blur the boundaries between legitimate assistance and inappropriate dependence. Students may understand the principles of academic honesty while still experiencing uncertainty about how these principles should be applied in digitally mediated academic work. This tension reinforces the need for universities to address academic integrity not only through prohibitions but also through explicit ethical guidance, reflective learning, and responsible digital practices.

The findings are consistent with Morris and Carroll (2016), who emphasize the importance of a holistic institutional approach to academic integrity, and Rasul et al. (2024), who argue that the generative artificial intelligence era requires more comprehensive ethical frameworks. Academic integrity cannot be strengthened solely through technical detection or punitive regulation. Students need opportunities to understand why originality, attribution, accountability, and responsible technology use matter within scholarly practice. These tensions also indicate that character formation is not a completed or uniform outcome. It is an ongoing process involving negotiation between moral commitments and practical pressures. Recognizing this complexity makes it possible to move beyond idealized descriptions of character education and examine how ethical behavior is actually developed, challenged, and reconstructed in everyday university life.

Character Formation in the Indonesian Cultural Context

The findings must also be understood within the Indonesian cultural context. Values such as respect, cooperation, politeness, social concern, mutual assistance, and collective responsibility are strongly associated with desirable character in Indonesian education. These values were reflected in students' respectful communication, participation in collective activities, willingness to support peers, and concern for group responsibilities. This supports research emphasizing the relevance of local wisdom and socially grounded character education in Indonesian higher education (Hidayati et al., 2020; Muassomah et al., 2020). Collective

activities can strengthen character by encouraging students to place shared responsibilities alongside individual interests. Group work, student organizations, committee activities, and community service create practical opportunities to develop cooperation, empathy, responsibility, and social concern. These practices are closely connected to the Indonesian value of mutual assistance, in which responsibility is understood not only as personal obligation but also as participation in collective well-being.

However, cultural values should not be treated as automatically positive or unproblematic. Respect for lecturers and institutional authority can support discipline, politeness, and ethical communication, but it may also discourage some students from questioning decisions, expressing disagreement, or discussing ethical concerns openly. Character education should therefore balance respect with critical reasoning, moral courage, and responsible dialogue. Students need to learn that ethical communication includes both politeness and the ability to express principled disagreement. This cultural interpretation strengthens the study's contextual contribution. The campus ecosystem does not develop character in a culturally neutral environment. Moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action are shaped through interactions among institutional expectations, Indonesian social values, peer relationships, and individual agency. The meaning of “good character” must therefore be examined in relation to both local cultural strengths and the tensions that may arise from hierarchical or conformity-oriented expectations.

Theoretical Contribution and Practical Implications

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the integration of Lickona’s three dimensions with an ecosystem-based model of character formation. The findings demonstrate that a single course or program does not produce moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. They emerge through the combined influence of learning, lecturer role modeling, habituation, peer interaction, academic culture, and student participation. The model also shows that contextual tensions influence the movement from understanding values to consistently practicing them. Peer pressure, digital technology, academic demands, personal convenience, and inconsistent habituation can interrupt the transition from moral knowing to moral action. This extends Lickona’s framework by placing the three dimensions within the social and institutional realities of university life. Character formation is therefore not only an individual psychological process but also an ecological process shaped by relationships, routines, policies, and cultural expectations.

Practically, the findings suggest that universities should avoid treating character education as an incidental activity or a separate moral campaign. Character development needs to be embedded within curriculum design, teaching practices, lecturer behavior, student mentoring, academic-integrity policies, and student activities. Course learning outcomes can explicitly incorporate ethical responsibility, while assignments can include reflective components that require students to consider the moral consequences of academic and professional decisions. Universities should also strengthen lecturer development related to ethical role modeling. Lecturers need institutional support to apply academic rules consistently, provide fair feedback, communicate respectfully, and model responsible use of technology. Because students evaluate values partly through the behavior of academic figures, inconsistencies in lecturer conduct may weaken the credibility of formal character-education messages.

Student activities should be designed and evaluated not only according to participation or achievement but also according to their contribution to cooperation, ethical leadership, social responsibility, and conflict resolution. Mentoring and reflective discussion can help students connect experiences in organizations and community activities with moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. The rapid development of artificial intelligence also requires specific institutional responses. Universities should provide clear guidance on acceptable and unacceptable uses of generative AI, require transparent acknowledgment of AI assistance, and teach students to evaluate originality, accountability, and intellectual ownership. Such policies should be accompanied by ethical literacy rather than relying only on sanctions. Overall, the study demonstrates that effective character education requires alignment across institutional policies, teaching practices, lecturer role modeling, peer culture, and student experiences. When these components support one another, the campus can function as a coherent moral ecosystem. When they are inconsistent, students may understand moral values but struggle to translate them into sustained ethical practice.

Limitations And Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study was conducted within a single faculty at one university. Although the participants represented students, lecturers, and student-affairs personnel, the findings are context-specific and should not be generalized statistically to all higher education institutions. The transferability of the findings may depend on similarities in institutional culture, student characteristics, academic practices, and approaches to character education.

Second, the study relied partly on interview data concerning moral values and ethical behavior. Because character is socially valued, participants may have presented themselves in ways that were consistent with institutional expectations. This possibility of social desirability bias was reduced through the use of concrete experience-based questions, source triangulation, observation, and document analysis. Nevertheless, interview accounts may not fully capture inconsistencies between participants' stated values and their actual behavior.

Third, the study used a cross-sectional qualitative design and did not follow changes in students' character over time. Character formation is a gradual process shaped by repeated experiences, changing social relationships, and different stages of university life. The present findings therefore describe how character formation was experienced and interpreted during the research period. Still, they cannot determine the long-term effects of learning, lecturer role modeling, student activities, or institutional interventions.

Fourth, although students' perspectives were included, the study did not use longitudinal self-reflection to examine how students perceived changes in their own moral development across different stages of study. Future research could use reflective journals, repeated interviews, or longitudinal case studies to trace changes in moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action more directly.

Future studies should involve participants from different faculties and universities to compare how institutional culture and disciplinary contexts shape character formation. Comparative studies across public and private institutions, urban and regional universities, or education and non-education faculties could provide a broader understanding of the campus ecosystem. Mixed-method and longitudinal designs may also help evaluate the relationship between institutional programs, students' moral development, and observable behavior over time. Further research is also needed to investigate character formation in digital academic environments. In particular, studies could examine how students interpret academic honesty, authorship, accountability, and responsible use of generative artificial intelligence. Such research would help universities design ethical guidance that responds to technological change without reducing character education to technical compliance.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that student character formation in higher education is an integrated and ecosystem-based process involving moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Students developed moral knowing through learning, academic guidance, institutional expectations, and participation in campus life. Moral feeling was strengthened through lecturer role modeling, peer relationships, empathy, social concern, and commitment to shared values. Moral action was expressed through discipline, responsibility, academic honesty, respectful communication, cooperation, participation in student activities, and responsible academic behavior. The findings also show that the transition from understanding moral values to practicing them consistently is not automatic. Peer influence, academic pressure, digital technology, personal convenience, and inconsistent habituation may strengthen or constrain moral action. Character formation should therefore not be understood as a fixed outcome or as the simple transmission of desirable values. It is an ongoing process shaped by interactions among individual commitment, social relationships, institutional culture, and everyday academic practices.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in integrating Lickona's dimensions of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action with an ecosystem-based interpretation of character education. This model explains how learning, lecturer role modeling, habituation, peer interaction, academic culture, and student activities jointly facilitate or interrupt the translation of moral understanding into ethical practice. It also places character formation within the cultural and institutional realities of Indonesian higher education. Practically, universities

need to embed character development across the curriculum, teaching, lecturer conduct, academic integrity policy, student mentoring, and student activities. Character education should include opportunities for ethical reflection, responsible decision-making, lecturer role modeling, collective responsibility, and the responsible use of digital technology. Institutional strategies will be more effective when academic policies, teaching practices, and student experiences communicate consistent moral expectations. In conclusion, universities can strengthen student character when they function as coherent moral ecosystems rather than relying on isolated programs or normative advice. The development of good character requires alignment between what students are taught, what they experience, what they internalize, and what they repeatedly practice in academic and social life.

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