The Correlation between Students' Character and Curricular Activities at the Moroccan University

Ayman Belhiyad
Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University
ayman.belhiyad@gmail.com (ESID 0535 6106 2023)

Abstract

The purpose of this non-experimental correlational study is to investigate the correlation between curricular activities and students' character in Moroccan tertiary level. The sample consisted of English department students from numerous Moroccan universities and institutions. The main research question seeks to answer if there is a statistically significant relationship between curricular activities and students' morals, ethics, values and citizenship. To this end, triangulation in data collection and analysis was employed. 220 students filled in the online questionnaires to study the correlation between university curricular activities and students' character, mainly their ethics, values, morals and citizenship. Besides, 17 students participated in three focus groups to elicit their opinions and attitudes towards their character, curricular activities and the relationship between the underlying variables. The quantitative data showed that there is a positive correlation between curricular activities and students' character while the qualitative date confirmed previous quantitative results concerning the positive correlations between variables. Overall, the results suggested that policy makers, university presidents and deans, faculty staff and teachers need to be aware of the strong positive correlation these activities have with students' morality, ethics, values and civic skills as well as the importance of curricular activities in developing students' character.

Keywords:
Curricular Activities, Character, Character Development, Ethics, Values, Morals, Citizenship

1. Introduction

Higher education is the backbone of any society which directs it to the correct and effective track towards the continuous economic and scientific advancements taking place in the world. The role of the university is not only to provide students with rich knowledge and up-to-date scientific information, but also contribute in various ways and be directly responsible for the development of society. Apart from imparting quality education, universities need to instill high moral and ethical values and practices amongst the student fraternity and sorority (Nair, 2014). Indeed, focusing on moral, ethical and civic values and principles is part of character education in tertiary level. In the past, early colleges and universities were more explicit in their efforts to influence students' character. Nowadays, higher institutions may contribute to the common good through direct institutional efforts, offering faculty expertise and relevant resources as appropriate (Brandenberger, 2005).

Moroccan higher education is striving to make the university a better place for students' success and development. However, although many initiatives and reforms have been taken since independence in 1956, the focus today is on language learning, digital technology and skills required in the job market. Moroccan higher education has not taken students' character development into serious consideration, as no approaches, methods, programs and activities to incorporate character education at university were implemented. This study tries to answer whether curricular activities have any significant correlation with students' character development in the Moroccan post secondary education. The results are important to the ministry of higher education, university presidents, deans and professors who aspire to make the university a place for the development of students' morals, ethics, values and citizenship.

1.2 Research Question and Hypothesis

The study seeks to answer the following research question and test the related hypothesis:

RQ: Is there a statistically significant relationship between curricular activities and students' character?

- H_0: *There is no correlation between curricular activities and students' character.*

### 1.3 The Significance of the Study

In Morocco, every year, many students get their baccalaureate degrees and enroll in various faculties to pursue their higher education. Indeed, university students want to get a higher degree which will help them get a job. In addition to learning and acquiring new skills and knowledge, the university is to be a place for students' character development. It should help students develop their values, ethics, morals and citizenship for the overall goal of becoming good citizens. The aim of this correlational study is to examine if the actual Moroccan university curricular activities have any significant correlation with students' character development.

2. Literature review

2.1 Character and character education

The word *character*, meaning to *engrave*, refers to "those markings engraved upon us which lead us to behave in certain ways" (O' Sullivan, 2004). The English word 'character' is derived from the Greek word *'charakter'* which denotes a mark impressed upon a coin. Later, the term 'character', came to mean the assemblage of qualities which distinguish one person from another (Homaik, 2007). Moreover, character refers to internal cultivation and externally demonstrated behavior form individual traits. These character traits, which have been shaped by the selection of moral cognition, emotion and love, are expressed in behavior. Character cultivation enables us to demonstrate moral consideration, emotion and action under certain context (Goldberg, 2007).

The term character education, a broad term to define, is intended to promote student development
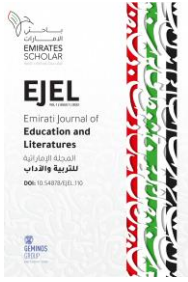
and motivate the individual to be a moral agent (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). Character education refers to the intentional efforts to help people understand, care about and execute core ethical values. Indeed, deliberate and comprehensive character education is a lens through which various school aspects become an opportunity for character development (Frye, 2002). Character education is a teaching activity which helps students acquire universal values with a core value that leads to the expression of moral thinking, moral promise, and moral behavior (Goldberg, 2003)

2.2 Morals and moral development

Morals are specific beliefs, behavior, and ways of being derived from doing ethics. Indeed, one's morals are judged to be good or bad through systematic ethical analysis. The reverse of morality is immorality, which means that a person's behavior is in opposition to accepted societal, religious cultural or professional ethical standards and principles (Rich, 2005). Furthermore, morals refer to behavior standards enabling people to live kindly and cooperatively in specific groups. They are principles which societies sanction as acceptable and right (The University of Texas at Austin, 2022). Last but not least, morals, a component of good character, are comprised of *moral knowing*–knowing the good, *moral feeling*–desiring the good and *moral behavior or action*–doing the good (Lickona, 1991).

There are three stages of moral development: pre-tradition, tradition and post-traditional. At the last stage, which is reached at the age of sixteen, the individual has based their moral ideas on some inherent moral absolutes. The last stage is important because it concerns higher education institutions as well as the age of their students. Moral development of young people still continues during the early years of the university life (Kohlberg, 1977, as cited in Silay, 2014)

2.3 Ethics and ethics development

Ethics is a branch of philosophy which studies ideal human behavior and ideals ways of being. As a philosophical discipline of study, ethics is a systematic approach to understanding, analyzing, and distinguishing matters of right and wrong, good and bad, and admirable and deplorable as they relate to the wellbeing of and the relationships among sentient being (Rich, 2005).

Developing students' ethics is an integral part of the mission of higher education institutions in that universities give an impression of moral indifference when they do not take their responsibilities seriously (Bok, 1982). Moreover, colleges and universities must accept some of the responsibility because it is in this environment where many professionals receive their first exposure to ethical standards and values– "Professional ethics begin on the college campus." (De Russy, 2003). As a matter of fact, governing boards within colleges and universities should establish clear standards for ethical behavior, encourage honesty and academic integrity and provide funding for ethics education (Davis, 2003-2004).

2.4 Values and values development

A value is defined as a belief which belongs to desirable purposes or forms of behavior that transcends the specific situations. This belief also guides the selection or evaluation of behavior, persons and events and organized by your relative importance to other values to form a system of priorities of values (Schwartz, 2006).

With the emergence of the university, as opposed to the old college, with its emphasis upon research and scholarship, the concept of "ethical neutrality" appeared. Faculty often assumed that it is no longer responsible for the value development of their students. This shift was a reflection of the university's desire and need to participate in the rapidly developing industrial and economic revolution of the time. Hence, the primary role of the professor was now scholarship at the expense of students' moral development (Sandeen, 1985).

2.5 Citizenship and citizenship education

Citizenship, a complex and fuzzy concept, means different things to many people (Joppke, 2007). Citizenship is the capacity to move beyond one's individual self-interest and to be committed to the well-being of some large groups of which one is member (Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002). It is an important aspect of our identities, involving our political engagement and participation in a community (Ross, 2007). In fact, good citizenship and democratic values within a society are based essentially on personal responsibility of citizens (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004).

Marshall (1998) identified three main aspects of citizenship: civil, political and social while Arthur and Davison (2000) stated that there are two dimensions of citizenship: *passive* and *active*. *Passive citizenship* refers to the fact that citizens know, understand and behave within the context of participating in democracy whereas *active citizenship,* also named "powerful citizenship", involves criticality so that citizens can question, debate and become leaders specified. On the contrary, Watters (2009) asserted that citizenship has both horizontal and vertical dimensions: the first refers to how people relate to each other while the second how they relate to local and national government. Last but not least, it is important to mention that citizenship Education refers to the teaching or fostering of knowledge, values, attitudes and behaviors related to governance and community. It is committed to and designed for developing citizens who participate in life, who work for and in the public good (Nilson, et. al).

3. Research methods

To study the correlation between university curricular activities and students' morals, ethics, values and citizenship, this study relied on mixed research method in which the quantitative and qualitative paradigms have equal emphasis. Mixed research method is defined as a research method which involves the mixing of quantitative and qualitative methods or other paradigm characteristics (Johnson & Christensen, 2013). In mixed research, focus groups might be useful to triangulate with more traditional forms of interviewing, questionnaire, observation and so forth (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). This study is no exception in that both questionnaires and focus groups are used to get deep results and better analyze the underlying correlations.

The questionnaire was not only posted in many Moroccan university Facebook groups, but sent individually to members of these groups who are university students via Facebook messenger. The researcher also asked many students who are his friends (Ph.D. students, Masters or undergraduate students) to help him in distributing the questionnaire through sending it to their friends using the same platform.

Concerning focus groups, the researcher held three meetings with three groups of students to study their character, character development, curricular activities and the correlation between them. More information about the composition and implementation of the focus groups is included in the following table:

Table 1

Focus Groups

Groups	Date	Time	Place	Participants	Males	Females	Levels
Group A	March 25th, 2019	60 mins (10-11 a.m.)	Abdelmalek Essaâdi University, Tetouan.	N=6	1	5	Different levels: S* 2, 4 and 6.

| Group B | April 01st, 2019 | 60 mins (4-5 p.m.) | Abdelmalek Essaâdi University, Tetouan. | N=5 | 2 | 3 | Different levels: S* 2, 4 and 6. |
| Group C | April 04th, 2019 | 60 mins (11-12 a.m.) | Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdullah University, Fez. | N= 6 | 1 | 5 | Different levels: S* 2, 4 and 6. |

*S= Semester

4. Results and discussion of findings

As stated earlier, this study is an attempt to analyze the correlation between curricular activities and students' morals, ethics, values and citizenship. The following section presents the findings emanating from questionnaires and focus groups. The study null hypothesis goes as follows:

H_0: There is no correlation between curricular activities and students' character.

4.1 Quantitative Data: Pearson's Correlation Analysis

The researcher used Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) to run a Pearson's correlation coefficient test to find the correlation between students' curricular activities and their character (morals, values, ethics and citizenship).

Table 2

Pearson Correlations for Curricular Activities and Morals, Values, Ethics and Citizenship

Correlations		Curricular Activities	Morals	Values	Ethics	Citizenship
Curricular Activities	Pearson Correlation	1	.344**	.353**	.502**	.531**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	220	220	220	220	220
Morals	Pearson Correlation	.344**	1	.624**	.474**	.409**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	220	220	220	220	220
Values	Pearson Correlation	.353**	.624**	1	.435**	.380**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	220	220	220	220	220
Ethics	Pearson Correlation	.502**	.474**	.435**	1	.540**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	220	220	220	220	220
Citizenship	Pearson Correlation	.531**	.409**	.380**	.540**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	220	220	220	220	220

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

A Pearson correlation analysis was employed to test the linear relationship between (1) curricular activities and morals, (2) curricular activities and values, (3) curricular activities and ethics and (4) curricular activities and citizenship. The output in Table 2 shows that the correlation revealed a moderate positive relationship between *curricular activities* and *morals*, $r=.34$, a moderate positive relationship between *curricular activities* and values, $r=.35$, a moderate positive relationship between *curriculum activities* and *ethics*, $r=.50$ and a strong positive relationship between *curricular activities* and *citizenship*, $r=.53$. Besides, the results provided evidence that the correlation coefficient was statistically very significant, $p<.01$. On the basis of these results, it can be concluded when the students engage in curricular activities aiming at the development of character, their morals, values, ethics and citizenship increase.

4.2 Qualitative data: focus groups
4.2.1 University curricular activities

"*Curricular activities*" is one of the subthemes emerging in the focus group data. Most participants agreed that the university curriculum they have affect their character positively. Thanks to these curricular experiences, lectures, presentations and discussions with their teachers, students feel high level of *self-confidence, pride, open-mindedness* and *development of new ideas*. One respondent said that "*The most important thing is about self-confidence when you stand there to make a presentation, it's not easy but.*" Some of the ideas students get thanks to such curricular activities become values instilled in their character. Examples of subjects in the department of English curriculum which help students develop their character are "Reading in Culture" and "Public Speaking". One respondent reported: "*I think that in 'Readings in Culture' the topics that we are studying, it may affect us, it may give us another view or image about some topics.*"

Thus, based on the qualitative data, what students study at university has a positive correlation with their character.

4.2.2 Students' character development

"*Students' character development*" is one of the subthemes in the focus group data. Most participants believed that the university is a place where students learn new values, morals and ethics. One respondent said: "*I think, first of all, the oldest you are in college the more values you have and morals.*" Therefore, the university is not only a place for learning purely academic subjects but also morals, ethics and values thanks to some curricular activities and interactions with teachers and friends. Respondents also revealed that character development is affected not only by university experiences, but also some aspects specific to the English department. According to the results, both the English department and students are characterized by variety, difference, acceptance and generosity. A respondent said: "*The English department is known as a generous department…I mean generous by thoughts, by ideas, by helping them like giving them handouts for those who weren't here.*" Other values mentioned in the focus groups data are *self-discipline, positive attitudes* and *courage*. However, some respondents had different opinions about students' ethics, particularly *students' discipline* and *acceptance of criticism*. One respondent said: "*Those type of people who don't accept criticism think they don't make mistakes or above other.*" Last but not least, three emerging subthemes that respondent mentioned in their discussions are *motivation, open-mindedness* and *acceptance*.

Regarding **values**, respondents agreed that students value *hard work, kindness* and *love*. One respondent said: "*I think at the university, I experienced a huge amount of kindness, people who are younger took care of me, times and times and times and to that I am so so so glad*". Other values

mentioned are *gratitude*, *humility* and *positive attitudes*.

Concerning citizenship, most respondents have negative attitudes towards *civic behavior and skills* as well as *being a good citizen*. One respondent said: "*When it comes to civic behaviors, they are names, they [students] are taking care of their personal staff and … I think these kinds of things.*" Besides, the majority of respondents had negative attitudes towards *community service* and *voluntary work*. One respondent said: "*The majority, the most of us, when you tell them about citizenship or Morocco, they always say they don't care about this country.*" Actually, in addition to being unmotivated, students do not find service learning opportunities at university. Finally, respondents had negative attitudes towards *political life* and *political activism*. For them, political life and activism at university are a failure, a waste of time and a hidden agenda. One respondent said: "*I am not part of it [The National Union of University Students]. Every rule or every decision is related to politics, every problem… and if we took the university as part of the society and the society is part of the country. I think politics is a failure right now.*"

5. Results, conclusions, implications and recommendations

5.1 Results

In this study, the quantitative and quantitative data provided interesting results regarding the correlation between university curricular activities and students' character in terms of morals, ethics, values and citizenship. Pearson's correlation test provided statistical evidence that the curricular activities which students have in college correlate positively with their character and character development. Based on the results, the hypothesis that there is not any significant correlation between university curricular activities and students' morals, ethics, values and citizenship was rejected.

Based on the research data as well as the definitions and views about what constitute good character by numerous scholars such as Berkowitz (2014), Berkowitz & Bier (2007), Lickona (1991), Pearson & Nicholson (2000) and Goldberg (2003), and based on the operational definition of character on which the research thesis is based, it can be concluded that the respondents relatively have good character. Indeed, the respondents relatively possess and appreciate good morals, ethics, values and citizenship thanks to curricular activities at the university.

As for the correlation between university curricular activities and students' character, the quantitative results were confirmed by the qualitative results as the majority of respondents agreed that, generally, such activities have a positive correlation with their character, mainly their morals, ethics, values and citizenship. Due to these curricular learning experiences including class lectures and presentations as well as discussions with their teachers about issues related to lectures and curricular content, students not only feel more self-confident, proud and open-minded, but also develop many new ideas and thoughts. Besides, the focus group results revealed that students learn many values which become part of their character thanks to such activities. Indeed, what students study and experience thanks to university curricular activities has an overall positive impact on their thoughts and character.

Previous research focusing the correlation between or the impact of university, in general, and the curriculum, in particular, on students' character is conducted by Astin & Antonio (2004), Goodman (2007) and Pascarella & Terenzini (2005). Indeed, this study results stress Austin and Antonio' (2004) suggestion that the college curriculum influences students' character and values during the college years. According to them, all institutions, including universities, by offering specific curricular opportunities for students, contribute to the development of college students' values and behaviors. The research findings also support

Goodman's (2007) idea that college attendance has positive impact on cognitive development, identity development and interpersonal development. Further, the findings of the study are in line with Pascarella & Terenzini's belief (2005) that the effects of college attendance on students are numerous in that students who go to university do learn and know more. For them, colleges not only add value to the students' lives and enhance their self-esteem, but also increase their understanding of others and their engagement with their communities.

5.2 Conclusions

During the process of collecting and analyzing data, the following results emerged:

a) The participants agreed that they possess good morals and but not good ethics.

b) The participants believe that they are not good citizens, lacking basic civic skills and behavior, community service and political interest as well as participation in political life and activism.

c) The participants agreed that university is a place where character development and growth happen and where they learn new values, morals and ethics thanks to specific curricular activities.

d) The participants agreed that the curricular activities they have at university (classes, lectures and presentations) are positively correlated with their character.

e) The participants, however, pointed out that the university curriculum needs improvement to better meet their character development as well as their ethical and moral growth.

5.3 Implications and Recommendations

The main aim of this paper was to study the correlation between university curricular activities and students' character in tertiary level. Character is operationally defined in this study as morals, ethics, values and citizenship while curricular activities are defined as classroom courses, lectures and presentations students have at university. It is essential to note that such curricular activities have a positive correlation with students' character and character development. University presidents, deans, administrators and professors should be conscious that the university years are the critical period for character and self-development. They have to follow a comprehensive holistic approach, design syllabi and incorporate activities aiming at helping students in their character and moral development which will provide future leaders with appropriate methods and skills to reestablish values at the center of consciousness. Furthermore, non-traditional approaches to learning such as inquiry-based learning, experiential pedagogies, especially those addressing community concerns, and active pedagogies are to be implemented in Moroccan higher education.

Moroccan university teachers are to design and implement effective character education programs tailored to meet the needs of students, college and society and for the benefits of all of these. These programs should be identified with prevalent practices which include professional development, leadership, mission-driven initiative, social emotional skill training, role models, direct teaching, intrinsic motivation, serving others, nurturing relationships, high expectations and a pedagogy of empowerment.

Moral education programs and courses which have been proved to be effective in promoting development in moral judgment such as dilemma discussion, personality development, academic courses and short-term interventions have to be part of the Moroccan higher education curriculum. Universities should encourage students' moral development, be successful in providing incentives to develop their moral judgment and start honor probation programs which require students to keep a structured journal on both their honor violation and their character development during probation.

Moroccan universities should focus on *cross-curricular models* for ethics education, including

basic elements of ethics education such as developing helpful relationships, socialization structures, fruitful thinking and moral strength. Furthermore, universities should offer specific curricular opportunities like civic classes and projects for students to contribute to the development of their character, values and behaviors. Besides, universities should integrate activities which promote moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, moral reasoning and moral character. Last but not least, Moroccan universities should encourage journal keeping and formal academic programs to promote character development and which encourage the discussion of contemporary ethical issues relevant to character.

University teachers may implement approaches which encourage *moral dilemma discussion* in the classroom thanks to which moral dilemmas are brought to the surface among students. Teachers may open classroom discussions about challenging moral issues and design classroom activities requiring opinion conflict resolution in order to contribute immensely to the maturity of students' moral judgment. Last but not least, teachers may take advantage of literature because it is not only one of the main vehicles of transmitting morals and values, but also allows students to reason out decisions and analyze the thought processes of those they read about and relate those experiences to their own lives.

6. Conclusion

This study has attempted to give a comprehensive insight on character education and the correlation between university curricular activities and students' morals, ethics, values and citizenship. Even though this study focuses on students' experiences with curricular activities related to the departments of English only, the findings would seem to be important and useful for other university departments and various stakeholders to improve character and moral teaching and learning in Moroccan higher education.

Like all research projects, nevertheless, this study has some limitations. The first limitation was related to the sample size since the number of the participants who filled in the questionnaires was only 220 in addition to 17 participants in the focus groups. A bigger sample size would have effectively helped in the generalization of the findings. The second limitation was the number of sub-variables constituting the main variable of character (morals, ethics, values and citizenship). In fact, without the help of SPSS, it would have been very difficult to study the correlations. The last limitation was related the lack of prior research studies on the topic of character education in tertiary level in Morocco. The researcher was able to find enough literature related to the study in other higher education contexts rather than the Moroccan context.

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