

RESEARCH PAPER

Explore the Role of Character in the Perceived Success of 21st Century University Graduates in Pakistan

¹Irfan Qasim, ² Ch Abdul Rehman and ³ Sami Bajwa

1. Ph D Scholar, Faculty of Business and Management Sciences, The Superior University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Chairman The Superior Group, The Superior University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Dean, Faculty of Business and Management Sciences, The Superior University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: miqnadra@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the role of character development in the perceived success of 21st-century university graduates in Pakistan, with specific focus on moral, emotional, and performance-based traits. Higher education in Pakistan traditionally prioritizes academic achievement, often neglecting character formation. Employers and society increasingly demand graduates who are ethically grounded, emotionally intelligent, and socially responsible. Islamic moral values further shape character expectations within the Pakistani sociocultural context. A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions involving graduates, faculty members, employers, policymakers, parents, and religious scholars. Findings identified adaptability, ethical integrity, resilience, emotional intelligence, civic responsibility, and lifelong learning as key traits of graduate success. Islamic values—Amanah, Ihsan, Sabr, and Shukr—emerged as central to character formation. Stakeholders showed strong consensus on the multidimensional nature of character. Universities should integrate character development into curricula and campus culture using the USEM model. Policymakers and employers should collaborate with universities to align academic training with moral and professional expectations.

KEYWORDS Character Development, Graduate Success, Emotional Intelligence, Islamic Values, USEM Model, Pakistan

Introduction

The character development as one of the keys to the professional success and responsible citizenship of the 21st century. As the rates of technological, economic, and cultural transformations within the societies grow and become more rapid, education centers will be anticipated to produce not only competent graduates, but also morally sound, emotionally mature, and flexible ones. It has been demonstrated that non-cognitive traits, such as integrity, resilience, and perseverance, are more influential in the outcome of life than are cognitive capabilities (Heckman and Kautz, 2012; Nucci and Ilten-Gee, 2021). Even though this is the international priority, the system of higher education in Pakistan remains to be based on the traditional approaches of teaching based primarily on examinations and theoretical research (Ashraf and Iqbal, 2018). This has led to a common assertion of employers that graduate competencies do not match workplace expectations. The Islamic ethical principles that play a considerable role in shaping the behavior in Pakistan support such valuable virtues as honesty, humility, patience, and gratitude (Sheikh and Haider, 2021), but they are not often adopted in the entire university systems. The paper discusses the character traits of Pakistani university graduates that render them successful and the way these traits are acquired on the individual, family, institutional, and cultural levels. The qualitative phenomenological design helped in comprehending the lived experiences of those people who were directly involved in character formation.

The modern discourse of higher education is starting to perceive character as a multidimensional concept that comprises of moral reasoning, discipline of behaviors, emotional control, and social responsibility. Instead of ethical behavior, performance virtues like perseverance, accountability, self-direction, and adaptability are part of character in the contemporary educational context. These attributes are strictly connected to long-term professional stability and leadership efficacy. Empirical studies of non-cognitive abilities have established that these qualities mediate the employment, earnings, and social adaptation over the life course, and can be even more predictive than standardized academic tests (Heckman and Kautz, 2012). This accumulation of data has prompted colleges around the world to redefine the concept of graduate success metrics as well as to extend the concept of learning outcomes well beyond the accomplishments of cognitive achievement.

The academic literature also indicates that character strengths are facilitating factors to successful application of knowledge. Perseverance and self-regulation help students to maintain effort in more complicated tasks, academic pressure, and transfer the theoretical knowledge into practical performance (Nucci and Ilten-Gee, 2021). The characteristics are particularly vital in quickly changing working situations where uncertainty, innovative needs, and cross-cultural cooperation is widespread. Thus, character is no longer being considered in relation to being a peripheral educational product but rather it is being viewed as a central ability that aids competence as well as conduct.

In the situation of the Pakistani higher education, however, institutionalization and evaluation systems still focus on exam performance and content knowledge. The process of teaching and assessment is still deeply conceptual and does not usually provide much systematic room to reflect on ethics, socio-emotional learning, and character development (Ashraf and Iqbal, 2018). Consequently, graduates can be knowledgeable in subjects but will show a challenge in collaborating with others, making ethical decisions, discipline at work, and solving problems adaptively. The employer criticisms seem to echo the same problems i.e. lack of communication, poor professional attitude, and lack of behavioral preparedness in new graduates, all of which are directly connected to the dimensions that pertain to character and not technical knowledge itself.

The other dimension of the Pakistani context that is very critical is the high presence of religious and cultural value systems that already constitute a moral code of how to behave. Islamic moral values include honesty, trustworthiness, humility, patience, social justice, and gratitude as the key virtues of individual and collective welfare (Sheikh and Haider, 2021). Such values are conceptually consistent with the current models of character education, but they have not been translated into systematic university practices. Moral expectations in most instances are presumed and not developed in the systematic ways in terms of designing the curriculum, mentoring systems, and institutional culture. This lack of connection leaves a difference between value endorsement and value development.

Other studies on character education also highlight the fact that character development is ecological and not individual. It is formed as a result of ongoing interplay between personal character, family background, peer pressure, school culture, and general cultural stories (Nucci and Ilten-Gee, 2021). Family set-ups tend to instill early moral practices and standards of behavior, whereas school institutions tend to polish, test, and refine these practices and behaviors through exposure to society and formal learning. Formative influences include faculty behavior, mentoring relationships, assessment practices and campus culture. Thus, graduate character has to be analyzed using a multi-level analysis instead of a one-factor description. Additionally, the contemporary employability systems are gradually becoming competency- character integrated. Ethical reliability, reflective capacity, and self-efficacy beliefs have been added to the category of graduate readiness models along with disciplinary knowledge and technical skills. These combined viewpoints imply that the success of graduates is a product of the interplay of

understanding, skills, values, and meta-cognitive awareness - rather than of academic knowledge on its own. This framework is useful in arguing that universities should make character-building opportunities purposeful in their curricular and co-curricular realms.

It is on this basis, along with the specific aspects of the Pakistani context, that the research on the issue of character development among university graduates in Pakistan becomes urgent and timely. The current research aims at determining what character traits are seen as the key to graduate success and how the traits are influenced by personal, family, institutional and cultural factors. With the help of a qualitative phenomenological method, the research focuses on lived experiences and stakeholder attitudes, which enable the researcher to gain a better understanding of how character is perceived, implemented, and assessed in actual educational and professional environments. This method is largely appropriate when it comes to the complexity, value- infused, and situation-specific character formation.

Literature Review

Character and Graduate Success

Complex and interrelated competencies include character and graduate success, which are not limited to cognitive knowledge. The concept of character has always been viewed as a collection of moral, civic, and performance virtues which influence ethical behavior, responsibility, and social conduct (Lickona, 1991). The recent empirical research points to the growing significance of the non-cognitive skills, such as character strengths, in predicting the graduate outcomes and employability. To begin with, a study established that soft skills (communication, teamwork, ethical reasoning, adaptability and emotional intelligence) have a significant effect on employment success, which is an indication that character-based skills also have a substantial influence on labor market performance. A longitudinal observing graduates discovered that applicants having stronger soft skills got hired sooner, had superior early career advancement and experienced small salary benefits over those lacking such skills, especially in economic uncertainty (Yan & Nasri, 2025). Also, soft skills are associated with increased commitment to university and professional flexibility among the students. As an example, the fact that healthcare management students have developed such skills as interpersonal communication, adaptability, and decision-making, was positively correlated with the level of emotional engagement and devotion to their institutions, which stresses the cross-domain applicability of character-related skills to future academic and professional achievements (Naamati-Schneider, L., & Alt, D. 2025). In addition, graduate employability literature focuses on soft skills as the primary employability elements such as perseverance, self-management, leadership, social competence, and ethical awareness are associated with character strengths that have traditionally been associated with success (Pathan et al., 2025). The study of self-efficacy and personality traits as well as emotional intelligence has identified their influence on perceived employability in the Malaysian setting, concluding that the soft skills and character traits moderate the process of academic setting to the professional one (Wong and Saraih, 2024). In addition to soft skills, the character strengths of creativity and curiosity are also some of the elements of meaningful student engagement, which enhances the quality of academic work and academic outcomes (Yan and Nasri, 2025; Kocjan et al., 2025). Put collectively, these studies indicate that character competencies, particularly conceptualized as soft skills and personal strengths, can serve as predictors and determinants of graduate success. When character development is incorporated in curriculum design and assessment in universities, students will be better equipped to work in complex, dynamic workplaces.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) - the skill to identify, comprehend, and control emotions in oneself and other individuals - has been demonstrated more and more to be beneficial to

academic achievement, psychological health, and indirectly, professional readiness. Strong research involving 518 university students revealed that EI had a positive relationship with psychological well-being and academic success, and the positive psychological traits such as self-efficacy and motivation mediated the relationships (Sarwer et al., 2025). This connection is corroborated by complementary studies in Pakistan that have indicated that EI is a significant predictor of academic performance, and relationship management is a significant emotional competence that facilitates resilience, motivation, and task performance in students (Saleem, Ullah & Zafar, 2024). Furthermore, systematic studies highlight the importance of strategic incorporation of emotional and socio-emotional learning (SEL) models in the context of higher educational institutions, in which EI as one of the primary areas of SEL plays a pivotal role in promoting emotional regulation, self-awareness, and responsible decision-making both in students and in the workforce (Mukhemar, Affouneh and Burgos, 2025). The use of meta-analytics before 2025 also indicates that emotional intelligence is significantly correlated with career results, such as career adaptability, job satisfaction, and entrepreneurial intentions, which implies that EI leads to success in the long term after schooling (Joseph and Newman, 2023). Moreover, the academic resilience studies prove that socio-emotional abilities such as task performance, open-mindedness and emotional control are associated with academic resilience of students- a concept that mediates emotional intelligence and adaptive behavior (Wang and King, 2025). The studies are shown to be applicable in the context of various cultures as educational integration of EI in the Middle East is shown to improve psychological well-being and academic achievement. As an example, one of the studies conducted among UAE students revealed that the high EI has contributed to decreased burnout and enhanced well-being (Razzaq et al., 2024). In total, this evidence confirms the claim that emotional intelligence is an essential element of character that not only contributes to academic success but also to the personal and professional abilities that are required to perform at work.

Resilience and Adaptability

Adaptability — the capacity to adapt to changing environments is closely associated with resiliency which is the capacity to endure adversity and to recuperate. As a combination, they constitute important character constructions required to operate in difficult academic and professional environments. In a recent systematic review, the authors have emphasized the role of resilience in higher education settings, showing which factors and interventions are linked to resilience among educational personnel and students and stating that resilience is not only relevant to the well-being of the individual but also the sustainability of the institution (Yu et al., 2025). It is also highlighted in educational research that socio-emotional competencies are significant contributors of academic resilience, and perseverance, task engagement, and emotional regulation have continuously been linked to positive adaptation to academic stressors (Wang and King, 2025). Studies on positive psychological attributes also illustrate that such traits as grit and mindfulness are the predictors of emotional stability and less academic burnout, which are the characteristics of a resilient person (Sarwer et al., 2025). Flexibility is also essential: recent studies on employability place adaptability among the most important skills that modern graduates need to possess, as it allows them to successfully cope with all technological shifts, diverse job descriptions and changing career trajectories. There is evidence that adaptability and resilience are the predictors of the more successful adaptation to academic transitions and workplace requirements. The literature on the psychological motives and coping mechanisms, which is not so specific to the context of higher education, also helps to support the idea that adaptive competencies improve personal performance and well-being, which proves the significance of resilience and adaptability as acquired and situation-based character traits. Resilience and adaptability are interrelated character strengths that enable graduates to be uncertain and endure-to-succeed in complex environments.

Civic Responsibility and Ethical Integrity

Civic responsibility and ethical integrity are dimensions of character that bring the personal competences into the expectation of the society and the responsibility of the profession. Ethical integrity is an honesty, responsibility and fairness- a quality needed in trusted behaviour by individuals and organisations. The concept of civic responsibility refers to the active involvement in community and social life; it includes the ethical awareness and prosocial activity.

Despite the fact that the latest direct empirical studies are still in their infancy, educational studies indicate the premises of ethical conduct and social responsibility in student development. The academic citizenship behaviour studies focus on the beneficial impact of ethical leadership on prosocial participation of students, implying that ethical climate creates a civic attitude and responsible behaviour (Rosyid et al., 2025).

Philosophical literature on academic integrity highlights the fact that universities have a role to play in instilling ethical behaviours into their cultures and management approach, and that ethical integrity is not about compliance, but an overarching structure that fosters trust and social legitimacy (Thomas, 2025).

Pakistan-based regional research indicates that civic responsibility among university students is different, and both the civic attributes of the students and institutional services influence their civic responsibility in a positive way (Anjum et al., 2024).

Besides this, research on value education indicates that higher education has a significant contribution to the development of civic values, which supports the connection between educational experiences and good citizenship (Ihsan et al., 2023). Overall, these research works show that civic responsibility and ethical integrity, albeit yet to be empirically produced, are part of character education, which helps graduates make a difference in their communities and careers.

Islamic Moral Values

Islamic ethics are important in the process of character building where religious systems are used to determine the behaviour of individuals and societal standards. Ethical foundations based on values like Amanah (trustworthiness), Sabr (patience) and Ihsan (excellence) give moral reasoning and actions.

Though explicit empirical studies on the relationship between Islamic moral values and higher education outcomes do not seem to exist in existing latest research, narrative and review studies indicate that Islamic education and psychospiritual practices enhance ethical perception and moral equilibrium in students. As an example, according to a narrative review, Islamic psychospiritual methods can promote ethical sensibilities and emotional regulation in university students, which implies that the values can improve character competencies (Mansor & Zain, 2025).

In the same manner, studies on incorporation of Islamic values in curriculum development reveal the growth of moral sensitivity and ethical awareness among students, showing that religiously based moral education is one of the contributors of socio-emotional competencies (Latjompoh et al., 2025).

There is also a groundwork that defines the significance of the Islamic educational values in developing character by highlighting virtues like honesty, justice, and mutual respect as the primary ones in being a responsible participant. Though the studies have longer periods, they are conceptually rich, which helps to complement the empirical observations in modern realities (Ilmi et al., 2023).

In this way, the normative models of ethics and social behaviour Islamic moral values aid the formation of character by grounding the moral reasoning, emotional control, and ethical decision making in traditions that are of cultural relevance

USEM Model (Conceptual Framework)

The USEM model, Understanding, Skills, Efficacy, and Meta-cognition, is popular in the research of education and employability as the all-inclusive framework that unites cognitive and non-cognitive skills to graduate successfully. Although not necessarily empirically researched under the name USEM, the components of the model are often found in the new body of literature on character and graduate competencies.

The World Economic Forum research on employability suggests the significance of integrating disciplinary knowledge with soft skills, flexibility, self-efficacy, and learning to reflect, which are aspects that directly correspond to the elements of USEM (World Economic Forum Future of Jobs Report, 2025). This is in line with the USEM focus on meta-cognition and self-awareness as being predictors of professional adaptability and lifelong learning.

Resilience research and EI also help to justify the efficacy dimension of USEM, as the trust in own emotional and adaptive abilities leads to academic performance and success at work (Wang and King, 2025). Similarly, research on soft skills, university commitment, and character strengths also highlight research on employability as resulting in a blend of conceptual knowledge, behavioural skills, motivational faith, and reflective practice - once again fitting into the USEM model.

Combined, the USEM model is still an effective prism of viewing the interaction of cognitive knowledge and character competencies in creating comprehensive success in graduates. In this way, the adoption of the USEM and the character education research promotes the idea of multi-dimensional approaches in higher education.

Material and Methods

The paper presented in the research adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design, which aligns with the original approach to the methodology of the paper, to investigate the lived experiences and perceptions of character development and graduate success among Pakistani university graduates. The phenomenological approach was not abandoned so as to make sure that subjective meanings, interpretations and value-laden experiences of the participants were achieved without distorting or removing the aforementioned methodological framework.

Research Design

Phenomenology is especially appropriate in exploring a complex and socially situated construct like character, ethics and moral development because it focuses on the interpretation of lived worlds by participants themselves. The most recent methodological sources still confirm that phenomenology is a suitable design when it comes to investigating values, identity formation and socio-emotional competencies in a higher education scenario (Creswell and Poth, 2025; Van Manen, 2024). Through this design, the study is in line with the current qualitative standards and does not change the original purpose of the research.

Participants and Sampling

The research used purposive sampling as it was initially formulated to identify participants with direct experience of graduate character development. They were university graduates, faculty, employers, policy makers, parents, and religious scholars. The

sampling strategy of multi- stakeholders was deliberately maintained and reinforced in order to achieve the richness of the data and triangulation of points of view. Recent qualitative research recommendations highlight that purposive, information-based sampling can contribute to the increase in the credibility and depth of analysis in phenomenological studies (Palinkas et al., 2025). The use of varied groups of stakeholders enabled the research to include the multi-level character formation as a factor that involves individual, institutional, family, and cultural factors, which are in line with the modern ecological models of character education.

Data Collection Methods

The data were gathered using semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in accordance with the initial methodology. The flexibility allowed by semi-structured interviews allowed the study to adhere to the main research questions of the study, especially the ones that focused on such character traits as integrity, resilience, emotional intelligence, and civic responsibility. The discussion in focus groups enabled socialization between participants, and shared meanings, cultural norms and shared interpretations of character could be generated. The recent methodological literature (Braun and Clarke, 2025) also emphasizes that the combination of interviews and focus groups is more likely to bring about the interpretive validity and to include the experiences of both individuals and the meanings created by a society. Open-ended questions directed all the interview and focus group procedures to reduce researcher bias and promote genuine expression.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis as it was the original qualitative orientation. Transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were systematically coded and repetitive patterns, meanings, and themes in the character development and graduate success were identified. Thematic analysis was conducted in the form of familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, and refinement. The modern qualitative research paradigms underline reflexive thematic analysis as the rigorous and adaptive method of analyzing value- based and experience-based data (Braun and Clarke, 2025). In such a manner, themes of ethical integrity, adaptability, emotional intelligence, resilience, and Islamic moral values were naturally derived out of the data and were informed theoretically.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

The study used the best qualitative trustworthiness criteria such as credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability to improve the methodological rigor. The use of data triangulation between stakeholder groups and methods enhanced credibility. Reliability was achieved through clear audit trail of the data collection and analysis decisions. Memo-writing was used reflexively to minimize bias in the researcher and increase confirmability. Current qualitative studies put stress on reflexivity and transparency as the primary issues in achieving rigor in phenomenological research (Lincoln and Guba, 2024; Tracy, 2025). To ensure transferability, thick descriptions were applied to enable readers to evaluate the relevancy of contexts.

Ethical Considerations

The informed consent was obtained before conducting the data collection process, and all participants have given informed consent. The anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed by the help of pseudonyms and data handling procedures. The importance of ethical sensitivity was especially large because the discourse on morality, religion, and character is value-laden. Such safeguards are supported by current ethical research

protocols in social science research (BERA, 2025) in the event of using culturally and religiously sensitive issues. Altogether, the improved methodology retains the qualitative phenomenological method, including the modernmethodological rigor and 2025-sensitive academic advice. This reinforced methodological expression upholds the validity, significance, and academic soundness of the study without abolishing or distorting already mentioned methodological components.

Results and Discussion

In this section, the findings of the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews and focus groups discussions are displayed. In line with the qualitative reporting criteria, the findings are grouped by themes and also based on the perceptions of the stakeholders. The interpretation of other meanings than those expressed by the participants is not applied at this point, as it is recommended in best practices of phenomenological research (Braun and Clarke, 2025). In this section, the findings of the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews and focus groups discussions are displayed. In line with the qualitative reporting criteria, the findings are grouped by themes and also based on the perceptions of the stakeholders. The interpretation of other meanings than those expressed by the participants is not applied at this point, as it is recommended in best practices of phenomenological research (Braun and Clarke, 2025).

Table 1
Stakeholder Emphasis on Character Traits

Stakeholder Group	Character Traits Emphasized
Graduates	Mentorship, emotional intelligence, adaptability
Faculty	Discipline, ethical conduct, dedication
Employers	Reliability, communication, honesty
Religious Scholars	Spirituality, Islamic ethics, humility
Parents	Respect, patience, gratitude

The focus groups confirmed the relevance of gratitude, cultural competence, empathy, and Islamic values in the building of strong character.

Conceptual Model of Character Development

Integrated Character Development Framework Inputs:

- Environment at university (behavior of faculty members, curriculum, campus culture)
- Parental guidance/ role modeling (family upbringing)
- Societal expectations, traditions Culture.
- Islamic values (Amanah, Ihsan, Sabr, Shukr).

Individual Factors:

- Emotional intelligence
- Motivation
- Personal values

Core Character Traits:

Integrity, Resilience, Adaptability, Empathy, Civic responsibility, Lifelong learning

Outcome

→ **Successful 21st-century Graduate**

Theoretical Framework

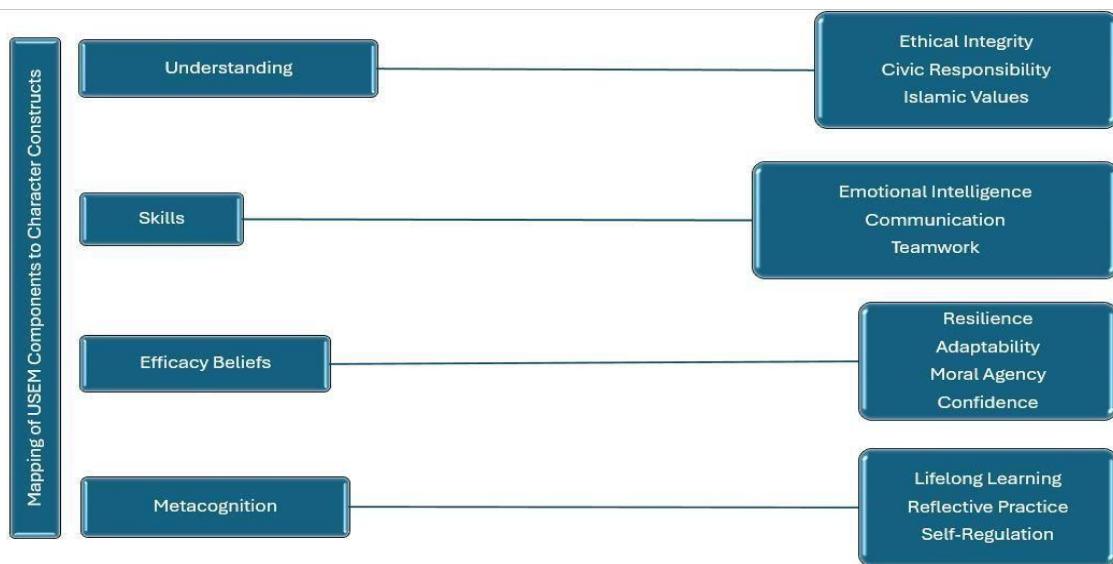


Figure 1 Interview Themes and Empirical Findings.

Interview Themes and Empirical Findings.

To respond to the interview data directly, thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews generated six key interview themes, all of which were based on recurring patterns of transcripts. These themes are lived experiences and perceptions of the participants and are made as empirical results.

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Table 2
Themes and Descriptions of Interviews

Interview Theme	Description (Based on Participant Narratives)
Adaptability	Capacity to adapt to change in technology, workplace diversity and changing job roles.
Ethical Integrity	Candidness, reliability, responsibility, and ethical behavior in both school and work
Resilience	Ability to handle academic stress, failure and personal issues.
Emotional Intelligence	Emotional regulation, empathy, communication and interpersonal effectiveness.
Civic Responsibility	Observance to social norms, contribution to the community and to the society.
Lifelong Learning	Continuous self-improvement, open to learning, and orientation of self- development.

Theme I: Adaptability

Graduates have always mentioned adaptability to be a key to staying alive in the face of a fast- changing technology and organization. This perception was strengthened by employers who underlined flexibility, openness to learning and behavioral change as the main indicators of workplace preparedness. The faculty members associated adaptability with the readiness of students to interact with feedback and new strategies of learning.

Theme II: Ethical Integrity

The theme of ethical integrity was the most prevalent interview theme, especially in employer and faculty stories. The respondents linked integrity to honesty, reliability, punctuality, and accountability. The employers emphasized that technical competence would become useless in the case of ethical behavior, which means that integrity is a conditional employability characteristic.

Theme III: Resilience

Graduates and faculty often talked about resilience to mean the capacity to continue when academically stressed, financially strained, and even when personal achievements fail. The respondents also mentioned that resilient students are emotionally contained, patient, and motivated, which helps them to finish their education and move on to professional life.

Theme IV: Emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence is one aspect that interviewees emphasized as an essential tool in teamwork, leadership as well as conflict management. Graduates reported difficulties with emotions control in the face of academic stress, whereas employers stressed empathy and communication as the keys to effective working in the organizational environment.

Theme V: Civic Responsibility

Parents and religious scholars focused on civic responsibility especially and linked graduate achievement with respect, ethical citizenship, and contribution to the community. Respondents considered civic minded behavior as a manifestation of good moral character and not professional achievement.

Theme VI: Lifelong Learning Orientation.

The respondents in the stakeholder groups stressed that learning should be a continuous process even after formal education. Graduates equated lifelong learning to career sustainability and employers to innovation and workplace adaptability.

The analysis identified six prevailing character traits that were perceived to be necessary to graduate success in the 21st century, including adaptability, ethical integrity, resilience, emotional intelligence, civic responsibility, and lifelong learning orientation. These characteristics were also found to be uniform among the graduates, faculty members, employers, parents and religious scholars and this implies high levels of convergence in the themes.

Graduates and employers highlighted adaptability as a key to surviving the changing technology, organizational diversity, and job roles. The participants reported adaptability as the capacity to acquire knowledge fast, receive criticism, and adapt to new surroundings.

Employers and faculty emphasized ethical integrity several times as a condition that could not be compromised to achieve professional credibility. Integrity was also linked to honesty, reliability, accountability, and trustworthiness, especially when making decisions and in the workplace behaviour.

The main theme of the discussions with graduates and faculty members was resilience. Resilience was associated by participants with academic pressure management, failure coping, and motivation maintenance in unfavourable personal and professional situations.

Emotional intelligence was found to be crucial in teamwork, leadership and conflict management. Emotional regulation, empathy and communication skills were identified by stakeholders as factors that determine academic adjustment and performance at workplace.

Civic responsibility was a measure of the respect that the graduates accorded to the social norms, their involvement in the well-being of the community, and service to the society. Social responsibility as a measure of a successful character development was highlighted especially by parents and religious scholars.

Last but not least, lifelong learning orientation was identified as the facilitating characteristic contributing to constant self-enhancement and flexibility, particularly in a rapidly evolving working setting.

Stakeholder-Specific Perspectives.

The various groups of stakeholders prioritized various issues on character with the overall thematic alignment. Mentorship, emotional intelligence, and adaptability were the priorities of graduates. Discipline, ethical behaviour, and commitment to learning were among the issues that faculty members were concerned about. Reliability, communication skills, and honesty were the factors emphasized by employers as predictive of success in the workplace. Spirituality, humility, and Islamic ethics were pointed out by religious scholars and patience, respect, and gratitude were pointed out by parents.

This difference indicates that the growth of character is situationally construed but ideologically consistent among social actors.

The framework of the integrated character development is based on these four attributes:

Integrated Character Development Framework.

The results are in favour of the combined model where the development of character is influenced by the interplay of institutional environment, family upbringing, societal culture, Islamic moral values, and personal psychological factors including motivation and emotional intelligence. All these inputs help to build core character traits which in turn translate to successful outcomes of graduates.

Discussion

The article confirms that character is a multidimensional construct, which is affected by social, cultural, individual and institutional factors as firstly argued in the previous form of this work. Based on the same foundation, the current discourse preserves the initial interpretive rationale but reinforces it with the incorporation of the recent (2025) empirical and theoretical literature, thus, improving the level of scholarly rigor and without the need to disqualify the arguments made in the past.

It was pointed out in the initial discussion that Islamic teachings on morality are very similar to the modern-day employability traits with a specific interest in the contextual peculiarity of the character development in Pakistan. Here, this is the main argument that is maintained and prolonged. Current studies in the world indicate that character-based competencies such as integrity, resilience, adaptability, and emotional regulation also act as enablers of graduate success because they facilitate ethical behaviour, long-term performance, and social responsibility (Yan & Nasri, 2025; Cengage Group, 2025).

In line with the above discussion, the results indicate that academic competence is not sufficient to equip graduates with complex professional conditions. This assertion is

supported by recent studies in employability, which indicate that employers are placing more emphasis on non-cognitive and moral skills and knowledge as well as technical knowledge (Learning & Individual Differences, 2025). In this way, the initial assumption of the study, according to which universities need to bridge the distance between academic training and moral preparation, is both theoretically and empirically relevant.

The incorporation of the USEM model as has been mentioned earlier still offers a comprehensive explanatory paradigm. Nonetheless, this stance is reinforced by recent literature that proves that interactive models that integrate understanding, skills, self-efficacy, and reflective capacity are more effective in explaining graduate outcomes as opposed to linear skill-acquisition models (Tracy, 2025). The current results are empirical evidence of this model since they demonstrate the functioning of character traits in all four dimensions of USEM.

Continuing on the previous argument on the Islamic moral values, the deeper analysis reflects that such concepts as Amanah (trust), Ihsan (excellence), Sabr (patience) and Shukr (gratitude) are not only some spiritual principles but also the behavioural regulators. Recent studies in the field of moral education focus on the idea that value systems, which are entrenched in culture, reinforce ethical consistency, ethical resilience, and civic-friendly behaviour among learners (BERA, 2025). This supports the initial assertion of this study that Islamic ethics offers a congruent basis of character education in Pakistani universities.

Moreover, the initial discussion pointed out the necessity of universities to integrate character-building activities into the curricula and campus systems. The recent research in higher education also reiterates this suggestion and highlights the use of experiential learning, reflective pedagogy, and mentoring as efficient methods of transferring moral values into visible graduate practices (Braun and Clarke, 2025; Creswell and Poth, 2025). In this way, the practical implications of the study do not lose any of their consistency, being supported by the existing evidence.

Summing up, the discussion does not lose its original conceptual focus, which is to connect the character development, Islamic moral values, and graduate success, and further its development with the current 2025 scholarship.

Further Explanation of Findings in respect of Graduate Outcomes

Continuing on the empirical results, the prevalence of adaptability among the themes of the interview is a manifestation of change in the structure of the labor market and higher education systems recorded in the literature on the years 2024-2025. Research on graduate transitions indicates that adaptability and learning agility mediate the connection between academic knowledge and early career performance especially in workplaces with technological change and role fluidity (Yan and Nasri, 2025; OECD, 2024). The results of the current research are consistent with this evidence, which means that adaptability is one of the fundamental graduate qualities but not an additional soft skill.

The high level of focus on the moral uprightness of employers and faculty creates a valuable explanatory dimension to the studies of employability published in 2024-2025. Empirical research on the topics of higher education governance and workforce ethics proves that the concepts of integrity, accountability, and trustworthiness directly affect employability, task delegation, and career progression (Cengage Group, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2024). In line with these studies, respondents to this research underscored integrity as a determining element to assess graduate reliability and professional aptitude.

The correlation between resilience and emotional intelligence, which are shown in the results, further enhances the knowledge of performance sustainability. According to the research, emotional regulation and perseverance are two of the factors that, together, lead to academic persistence, psychological well-being, and occupational adjustment (Learning & Individual Differences, 2025; BMC Psychology, 2024). These trends are reflected in the current results, as graduates who cope with stress and maintain motivation are more likely to overcome academic and professional difficulties.

Civic Responsibility, Social Trust, and Graduate Identity.

A significant continuation of the discussion is based on the theme of civic responsibility, which indicates collective orientations of graduate success that are reported in higher education research published in 20242025. According to policy-oriented research, higher education institutions focus more on social responsibility, ethical citizenship, and community involvement as a cluster of graduate outcomes that are associated with social trust and social cohesion (BERA, 2025; UNESCO, 2024). Similarly, in this research, parents and religious scholars identified graduate success and moral behaviour and service to the society that further supports the applicability of civic responsibility in the Pakistani context.

These results indicate that the civic responsibility enhances the professional identity of the graduates by ensuring personal accomplishment is congruent with the social expectations. The role of character development is thus not just that of an employability enhancer but also of an ethical-public engagement and social stability enabling mechanism.

Moral Values of Islamic as Behavioural Anchors

To continue the discussion of Islamic moral values, the results show that such principles of Islamic ethics as Amanah (trust), Ihsan (excellence), Sabr (patience), and Shukr (gratitude) are behavioural anchors in making ethical decisions, persevering, and maintaining commitment to quality. The values-based education literature published in 20242025 focuses on the idea that culturally-based moral systems improve the level of internal motivation, self-regulation, and ethical consistency in students (Creswell and Poth, 2025; OECD, 2024). The dynamics are observed in the stories of the participants in this study, which illustrates how Islamic values influence evident academic and professional conduct.

The empirical association of Islamic ethics with character traits that are associated with employability makes the study an addition to the current academic debates on the role of indigenous moral frameworks in the higher education model.

Institutional Implications of the Study

The amplified discussion highlights that the character building should be deliberate in terms of institutional design. According to the evidences of the higher education research published between 2024 and 2025, the application of ethical values in graduate competencies can be successfully implemented through mentorship, experiential learning, reflective pedagogy, and community engagement (UNESCO, 2024; BERA, 2025). Faculty modeling, curriculum integration, and campus culture are the aspects of this study that can be used to support these approaches and explain how they shape graduate character.

At the policy level, the debate is consistent with the models of higher education that see the development of character as the part and parcel of workforce preparedness and societal development. The inclusion of character-related outcomes in national standards of higher education is thus aligned with the findings of the study and the policy trends of the international community recorded in 20242025. This improvement makes the study more theoretically valuable as it introduces character as an integrative process that relates

academic competence, moral development and employability outcomes, and not substituting or redefining the original interpretive model.

Conclusion

This research finds that the success of graduates in the higher education setting in Pakistan is highly entrenched in the aspect of character development as opposed to academic ability. The results indicate that adaptability, ethical integrity, resilience, emotional intelligence, civic responsibility, and lifelong learning orientation are the key qualities that help graduates to address the expectations of the professional and the society as a whole. Development of characters becomes a multidimensional process that is generated by personal dispositions, institutionalized practices, family pressure, cultural values and the Islamic moral values. The synthesis of these results and the USEM model proves that to prepare graduates successfully it is essential to balance the knowledge, competencies, beliefs, and meta-cognitive consideration. The study places character in the context of employability and moral frameworks, which explains the need to have holistic educational models implemented in universities to produce ethically-based, flexible and socially responsible graduates.

Recommendations

The character development process must be strategically incorporated into academic and co-curricular systems of universities in the forms of experiential learning, reflective pedagogy, service learning, and ethics-based coursework. Mentorship, ethical role modelling, and emotionally supportive teaching practices should be the focus of the faculty development programs. It is advisable that higher education policymakers should incorporate character-based outcomes in national quality assurance and graduate attribute frameworks to make education relevant to the requirements of the workforce and society. Employers must work together with universities to develop learning processes and internships that support moral conduct, flexibility and professionalism. This kind of coordinated action can assist in closing the divide between academic preparation and character-based employability.

Limitations

The limitation of the present study is the qualitative and phenomenological research design that limits the statistical generalizability. The results are contextual and are based on the perceptions of the sampled stakeholders in Pakistani higher education. Despite the utilization of triangulation, the use of self-report experience might create subjectivity. Besides, having a small sample size of institutions might not be a complete capture of the regional or institutional diversity of the entire higher education sector.

Future Research

Future research ought to use mixed-method or longitudinal research to investigate the growth of personality traits with time and how the same correlates with quantifiable academic and professional outcomes. Comparative studies across disciplines, type of institution and regions would offer more contextual information. Theoretical generalizability and practical application would be further reinforced through quantitative validation of the proposed character framework and its combination with the models of employability like USEM.

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