

EXPLORING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' INTERNALISATION OF INTEGRITY THROUGH THE INTEGRITY AND ANTI-CORRUPTION COURSE (KIAR)

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Abstract. This study explored students' attitudes towards integrity prior to taking the course, students' internalization process of integrity after experiencing the Integrity and Anti-Corruption Course and the students' evaluations of the Integrity and Anti-Corruption Course in promoting the value of integrity beyond the university setting. By employing the qualitative research design using focus group discussions (FGD), the findings revealed three key stages of the integrity development. First, students initially perceive integrity as honesty, personal morality and adherence to values which were shaped by family and religious upbringing. Second, the students highlighted experiential pedagogical approaches such as case studies, role-playing activities, and discussions on real-world corruption cases. Third, majority of the students evaluated the course positively for preparing them for future professional roles while recommending more relatable case studies to their life and future professions, experiential learning opportunities, and engagement with industry practitioners and government agencies. This study contributes to the growing discourse on experiential and critical pedagogies, the subject of KIAR, ethics and government policies that advocates for anti-corruption and integrity which support the internalization of integrity as one's identity and value system.

Keywords: *experiential pedagogy, affective domain, internalisation of integrity, qualitative, Malaysian Studies*

Introduction

The Integrity and Anti-Corruption Course, known as Kursus Integriti dan Anti-Rasuah (KIAR), is a subject within the Mata Pelajaran Pengajian Umum (MPU) curriculum offered to students studying in Malaysian higher education institutions. Since 2023, it has become a compulsory course in both public and private universities. This initiative is part of the educational approach outlined in the National Anti-Corruption Plan (NACP) 2019-2023, which mandates courses across Higher Learning Education Institutions (IPT) at certificate, diploma, and bachelor's levels, emphasising Integrity and Anti-Corruption. This effort is led by the Ministry of Higher Education. The policy is carried forward through the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) 2024-2028, which aims to enhance the implementation of the course across higher learning institutions. According to data from the Record Management and Information Division of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), 88 youths aged 15–30 were arrested for corruption. The figure increased in 2023, with 93 youths detained for similar offences such as offering or giving bribes, accepting bribes, and other corruption-related crimes (IYRES, 2024). This data should serve as a reminder to students that among the youth are former students from the Institute of Higher Learning.

The temptation of corruption is compelling when students enter the workforce, as noted by Deputy Chief Commissioner (Prevention) of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), Datuk Seri Norazlan Mohd Razali (BERNAMA, 2022). Corruption primarily stems from a lack of integrity. Understanding the concept of integrity in this course is crucial for preventing future bribery and corruption. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on KIAR as one of the Malaysian government and education efforts to develop Malaysian youths with high integrity and critical awareness of anti-corruption.

Literature review

The issue of integrity and corruption has become an increasingly important concern within higher education institutions due to their role in shaping future professionals, leaders, and citizens. In response to growing concerns regarding corruption and ethical misconduct, educational initiatives have been introduced to cultivate integrity values among students at an early stage of their professional development. However, developing integrity extends beyond merely providing knowledge about ethical principles and anti-corruption measures. It also involves the process of internalisation, whereby values are gradually adopted, accepted, and integrated into an individual's belief system, behaviour, and decision-making practices. This literature review examines three key areas relevant to the present study which are, the conceptualisation of integrity and value internalisation, Krathwohl's affective domain framework as a lens to understand the development of values, and existing studies on the Integrity and Anti-Corruption Course (KIAR) within higher education institutions.

Conceptualization of integrity and Krathwohl affective domain framework

Integrity can be defined through a code of conduct that encompasses good values, honourable ethics and upholding virtuous religious beliefs while corruption is the anti-thesis of upholding the values of integrity. Internalisation is often described as “the process by which individuals adopt societal values” (Deci and Flaste, 1995). Internalisation of values (also known as value internalisations) is defined as “taking over the values and attitudes of society as one's own so that socially acceptable behavior is motivated not by anticipation of external consequences but by intrinsic or internal factors” (Wu et al., 2025). In addition, valuing is one of the components of Krathwohl's taxonomy which is the third level of the affective domain. It reflects how much importance a student places on a particular object, phenomenon, or behaviour. It spans from simply accepting a value to demonstrating a deeper level of commitment. Organization is the fourth level referring to the process of comparing, relating, and integrating different values into a coherent value system that guides an individual's judgments and actions. Lastly, characterization refers to the last level where a value system has been fully internalised and consistently influences an individual's behaviour, identity, and way of life. Furthermore, it involves internalising specific values, which are often reflected through observable behaviours in students (Krathwohl et al., 1964). Learning outcomes within this domain show actions that are consistent and stable enough to demonstrate acknowledgement of these values. Instructional objectives described as “attitudes” and “appreciation” generally fall into this category.

Based on this study, at the valuing level, students demonstrate that they appreciate, endorse, and attach personal importance to integrity and no longer view KIAR as a

course requirement but as a desirable value that should be upheld in personal, academic, and social contexts. At the level of organization, it refers to the stage where an individual begins to integrate integrity values into a personal value system, reconcile conflicting values, and use those values to guide decision-making and behaviour consistently. Lastly, characterization refers to the highest level of the affective domain, where integrity values have been fully internalised and become a stable part of an individual's character, identity and way of life. Upon reviewing the literature on the internalisation of integrity, there are limited research within the context of Malaysian studies and education of KIAR that have utilized Krathwohl's affective domain framework. In this study, the students' internalisation process as their guiding principles were explored from valuing, organization and characterization. It is at the characterization level that one can observe the internalisation of integrity. By utilising Krathwohl's affective domain as an analytical framework, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of integrity formation that extends beyond cognitive awareness and shifting towards ethical self-regulation, professional responsibility and identification with the values of integrity.

Studies on KIAR within the context of higher education institution

Integrity studies at higher private learning institutions show the same trend as studies in public universities, where the majority of respondents comprehend, know, and can distinguish between behaviour and those without integrity. In 2023, research conducted by Zin et al. (2023) found that students are receptive towards upholding integrity and has generally positive understanding on integrity. However, the article found concerning gaps between students' perception of integrity and corruption with recognising certain practices of corruption. This sentiment echoes Rahman et al. (2023) investigation in the same year on students' perception towards corruption. Other research argued that the impact towards attitude and behaviour of students towards corruption cannot depend solely on affective and cognitive elements. This is because there are other environmental and situational factors that also influence that practice such as religion and social norms. For example, in the Islamic perspective, integrity is an inward value that is in line with the nature of trust, honesty, faith, strong beliefs, strict adherence to Islamic rules, and noble manners. Muslim students in higher public learning institutions understand the importance of academic and social integrity, although some nonetheless breach the code. However, a concerning issue were raised by other research where they found that students were also unable to discern and recognize micro corruption occurring within an interpersonal context. For instance, one study shows that even though students can recognise corruption when it "involves a significant amount of money or costs [...] other minor types of corruption, such as receiving entertainment fees, gifts, and kickbacks to promote transaction efficiency, are still acceptable." (Rahman et al., 2023). In fact, it is interesting to note that even though some students understand the concept of integrity, yet a few still do not understand that plagiarism occurring within the context of education is also one example of dishonesty and fraudulence (Yusoff, 2019). To conclude, the extant literature suggests that university students generally possess a positive understanding of integrity and were able to recognize macro level forms of corruption, however, studies have consistently highlighted a gap between students conceptual understanding of integrity and their ability to recognize and respond to more subtle, everyday forms of micro-corruption and ethics such as academic dishonesty and other forms of micro-corruption, such as

plagiarism, gift-giving, favouritism, academic dishonesty, and other forms of micro-corruption. This gap is particularly evident within the context of the Integrity and Anti-Corruption Course (KIAR), where research has largely focused on learning outcomes and perceptions rather than the developmental process of Integrity value internalisation.

Materials and Methods

The method of focus groups discussions has been frequently used as a research method on understanding people's perceptions and attitudes. In the 1950s, the market researchers began to use this technique to collect more accurate information about the consumer's product preferences. Discussing the history of focus groups, Rice and Ezzy point out that Bogadus in 1926 initially explained group interviews in social science research. In other fields particularly during World War II, Merton also used focus groups as the means for analysing people's responses on war-related propaganda and the efficacy of the soldiers' training contents. Although this study does not explore war related propaganda or soldier training modules, this method will enable the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the respondents' opinions and experiences. The rationale of utilising the qualitative method for this study is to collect high-quality data in a social context (Patton, 2002), which primarily help understand a specific problem from the viewpoint of the participants of research. Focus group provides "a rich and detailed set of data about perceptions, thoughts, feelings and impressions of people in their own words". This method is suitable for examining sensitive issues particularly when conducting research with children and youths.

The selected respondents of this study are bachelor-level students who registered in the February and April 2025 semesters, specifically those enrolled in the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), Computing, Games Development, Engineering, Media Production, and Culinary Management programmes. These students will soon be working in high-risk companies across various industries, including automotive, aviation, property, information technology, telecommunications, financial services, oil and energy, hospitality and tourism among others, which are potentially vulnerable to bribery and corruption. To be more specific, the study will select Malaysian students, a mixture of Malay and non-Malay students who have enrolled in the Anti-Corruption and Integrity course in 2025. In terms of age, they range from the ages of 15 to 30 years which is based on the categorisations of youths in the National Youth Index which are youths in universities. There were five FGD groups. Each group consists of a combination of Malay and non-Malay students in which the ratio is 3:3 with a total of 35 student respondents expected to participate, including a pilot study consisting of 5 respondents which were three Malays and two non-Malay students. The pilot study was conducted to test the validity of questions and observe the reactions and opinions of the students. Six FGDs were conducted using a semi-structured discussion guide. The protocol was designed around three research objectives: (1) students' understanding of integrity prior to taking the course, (2) experience of integrity internalisation, and (3) perceived relevance of integrity beyond university life. Each discussion lasted between 40 and 100 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Results and Discussion

Demographic profile

The study's findings are divided into four sections: demographic profiles of the youth informants and findings based on the three research questions. The demographic profile of the key informants was presented by considering their ethnicity, age, gender, and program background. *Table 1* provides a summary of these findings.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the youth key informants.

FGD	Program	Ethnicity	Gender	Religion
Pilot	Mass Comm; Business	3 Malays; 2 Chinese	3 Females; 2 Males	Islam; Buddhism; Taoism
Group 1	Engineering; Accounting	3 Malays; 2 Chinese; 1 Indian	4 Males; 2 Females	Islam; Hinduism; Taoism
Group 2	Accounting; Game Development	3 Malay; 1 Chinese; 1 Indian	4 Males; 2 Females	Islam; Hinduism; Taoism
Group 3	Accounting, Game Development, Engineering	3 Malay; 2 Chinese;	2 Males; 3 Females	Islam, Buddhism
Group 4	Engineering; Accounting	2 Indian; 2 Malay	2 Males; 2 Females	Islam; Hinduism

Students' attitudes towards integrity prior to taking the course

The findings revealed that students entered the KIAR course with a generally positive attitude towards integrity. Three major themes emerged: (1) integrity as honesty and truthfulness, (2) the influence of family and religion and (3) integrity as rule-following and moral guidance.

Theme 1: Integrity as honesty and truthfulness

Most respondents associated integrity with honesty, truthfulness and consistency between beliefs and actions. Integrity was perceived as a basic moral value that guided personal behaviour. These findings suggest that students already possessed a foundational understanding of integrity prior to enrolling in the course. Their definitions were primarily individualistic and focused on personal morality rather than broader societal or professional responsibilities. Below are the quotes from the informants which represent the opinions of other groups as well,

...being honest. (Pilot, YCT)

...staying true to yourself and when your principles guide your actions. (G1, AYY)

Theme 2: Family and religious socialisation

The second theme highlights the importance of family upbringing and religious teachings in shaping students' early understanding of integrity. Many respondents explained that values related to honesty, responsibility and moral behaviour were learned from parents, teachers and religious education. These findings suggest that integrity was initially understood as a moral obligation reinforced through socialisation processes rather than through formal ethical reasoning. These findings are aligned with where religious teaching and social norms learnt from the family served as external reference points that encouraged students to behave ethically. Below are the quotes from the informants:

I am Buddhist... my family, they always talk about karmas enough to scare us.
(G1, YMX)

I believe in God... when no one's watching, God is still watching. (G4, A)

Theme 3: Integrity as following the rules

The last theme was the perception of integrity as compliance with rules and regulations. Several respondents viewed integrity as adhering to established laws, norms and guidelines to distinguish right from wrong. For example, many of the respondents have a shared understanding that integrity means following the rules:

I do believe integrity is following the rule... I need some guidance to know what is right and what is wrong. (G2, NB)

However, not all participants agreed with this interpretation. Some distinguished between compliance with rules and ethical principles underlying those rules. This unique finding demonstrates differing levels of ethical sophistication among participants. While some students relied on external rules as moral guidance, others began reflecting on the ethical rationale behind those rules. Below is the unique quote that contradicts the notion that integrity means following the rules,

I feel integrity is separate from the rules because you can follow the rule or law, but you could be violating the spirit of the rule or the law. (G5, YC)

From the perspective of Krathwohl's affective domain, these responses reflect the Valuing level. Students demonstrated acceptance of integrity as an important value and expressed personal commitment towards honesty. Students first received moral values through authority figures and spiritual teachings. The findings on religious teaching to develop integrity is aligned with Zabidi et al. (2020), who argued that ethical and moral values are rooted in an individual's spiritual awareness and inner beliefs. These values became personally meaningful and accepted as part of their moral worldview. Integrity was viewed positively and considered desirable, even though most of them had yet to develop a more complex ethical framework for applying integrity in diverse situations prior to learning KIAR. From Krathwohl's perspective, students who viewed integrity solely as rule-following remained largely within the Valuing stage. In contrast, those who critically evaluated the spirit behind the rules showed early signs of Organization, where values are examined, prioritised and integrated into a broader ethical framework.

Students' internalization process of integrity in the context of the KIAR course

The findings indicate that students experienced integrity internalisation through three interconnected processes which are, expanding their understanding of integrity beyond personal morality, negotiating integrity in everyday ethical dilemmas, and developing integrity as a form of internal ethical self-regulation. The findings indicate that KIAR course contributed to integrity internalisation at multiple affective levels, with most participants demonstrating Valuing and Organisation, while smaller number exhibited evidence of Characterization.

Theme 1: Expanding integrity beyond personal morality

Many respondents highlighted that the KIAR course broadened their understanding of integrity from a personal moral value to a wider socio-political and professional responsibility. Case studies involving corruption scandals such as 1MDB, Altantuya and Jho Low were frequently identified as influential learning experiences. Below are the quotes from the respondents,

Doing research on 1MDB made me realise that integrity isn't just a personal value, it actually affects organization, the communities and even society. (G1, AYX)

Reading about Altantuya case really opened up my eyes like how things could be so much worse. (G2, KS)

Next, through role-play activities further encouraged the majority of the respondents to imagine themselves in future workplace situations and reflect upon the consequences of ethical decision-making.

The roleplay... I had to dig deep inside myself and question myself whether I would be able to do the same thing when I'm working later. (G2, EQ)

Theme 2: Negotiating integrity in everyday ethical dilemmas

Despite recognising the importance of integrity, students frequently described situations where integrity had to compete with other priorities such as friendship, convenience, academic pressure. Technological efficiency and group harmony. These are the everyday and interpersonal context of communication where the respondents experienced ethical dilemmas on establishing integrity in their daily life as a student. Below are the quotes:

I still signed the attendance for my friend... (Pilot, DH)

I use AI when I need to know an information fast. But I don't use it as a whole. (G2, MDH)

I know I should technical do something about it... but for the sake of group harmony (G5, YC)

These findings suggest that students continuously negotiated integrity within the realities of student life, particularly in relation to teamwork, peer relationships and the growing use of artificial intelligence.

Theme 3: Integrity as internalised ethical self-regulation

A smaller group of respondents demonstrated evidence of deeper integrity internalization. These participants described integrity as an internal moral compass that guided behaviour regardless of external supervision. Below are their quotes,

I started documenting and recording more things because paper trails help. (G5, YC)

You must have integrity, if you don't, it's easy to be corrupted. (G5, MM)

Integrity is trying to do the right thing without people watching you. (G4, YS)

Participants described integrity as a personal responsibility that influenced everyday behaviour, accountability and professional conduct. Taken together, the findings suggest that integrity internalisation occurred as a developmental process consistent with the Krathwohl's affective domain. The findings further suggest progression towards Organisation, where students actively negotiated integrity alongside competing values such as friendship, convenience, academic performance, technological efficiency and group harmony. Rather than merely accepting integrity as important, students engaged in ethical reasoning and attempted to reconcile integrity with the practical realities of everyday life. The findings of this study support Kurniawan et al. (2023), who found that many university students are aware of plagiarism and familiar with plagiarism detection tools yet continued to engage in academically dishonest practices. Similarly, participants in the present study acknowledged the ethical concerns surrounding plagiarism and AI use, but often justified these practices due to convenience, time pressure, and academic demands. This suggests that awareness alone is insufficient for integrity internalisation. Finally, a smaller group of participants demonstrated evidence of Characterisation, the highest level of the affective domain. These students described integrity as an important component of their identity and behaviour, guiding their actions even in the absence of supervision or external rewards. Integrity was no longer perceived as a rule to be followed but as an internalised value system that shaped personal and professional conduct.

Students' evaluations of KIAR in promoting the value of integrity beyond the university

Overall, participants evaluated the KIAR course positively and acknowledged its role in strengthening their awareness of integrity and preparing them for future professional responsibilities. However, respondents also identified several areas for improvement, particularly in relation to content relevance, learning activities, and practical engagement.

Theme 1: Preparing students for professional and ethical responsibilities.

Many participants perceived the course as beneficial for their future careers, particularly those enrolled in professional programmes such as accounting and ACCA. Respondents highlighted that the course reinforced ethical principles, professional accountability, and awareness of corruption-related risks in the workplace.

[KIAR] help me to strict myself again and remind me what to do and what to not do in my future job. (Pilot, TYC)

Especially if I want to work in a leadership or public service job. It showed me how corruption or unethical behaviour can damage trust, teams and even entire organizations. (G1, AYX)

Participants frequently linked integrity to their future professional identities and expressed a desire to uphold ethical standards in their careers.

Theme 2: Towards a more contextualised and experiential integrity education

While students appreciated the course objectives, many argued that the content could be made more relatable to their everyday experiences. Several respondents felt that the existing emphasis on high-profile corruption cases and government-related content created a disconnect between course materials and students lived realities. These findings suggest that students desire integrity education that is practical, experiential, emotionally engaging, and directly connected to their future professions and everyday lives. Below are their comments:

It feels very sterile... the government part is not relatable. There's like a gap.
(G5, TYC)

I think the case study can be more real-life related to us. (G1, HH)

Students also advocated for greater cultural and religious inclusivity when discussing integrity.

Not focusing on Islam only... work from the Buddhist side... make it more inclusive.
(Pilot, BM)

Many participants suggested incorporating more active learning approaches, including forum style discussion, profession-specific ethical dilemmas, and collaborative reflection activities.

Maybe every week we can have a real-time open discussion...like a forum style.
(G1, MAA)

Beyond classroom activities, students strongly recommended practical engagements that would allow them to witness the real-world consequences of corruption and unethical conduct.

Field trip... to understand the government system a bit more and see how people even become corrupt in the first place. (G2, SL)

Participants also believed that hearing directly from practitioners, MACC officers who handled corruption cases, talking with whistle blowers, and individual affected by corruption would create stronger emotional connection to the subject matters.

Perhaps try to invite guest speakers... someone from MACC. (G1, YMX)

When they get more emotional, they get more attached. (G3, R)

The finding suggests that students viewed integrity development as an ongoing process extending beyond university education and into their future professional and personal lives. The respondents consistently expressed a commitment to applying

integrity within their future careers, particularly in professions where ethical decision-making and public trust are essential. This indicates that integrity was no longer perceived solely as an academic topic but as a professional and personal responsibility. This finding is aligned with Ariffin et al. (2022), where their study found that the university education contributed to the students' integrity development in which the university is the gateway for the students to develop integrity at the personal and professional level. From the perspective of Krathwohl's affective domain, the findings demonstrate strong evidence of Valuing and Organisation. Students recognised integrity as an important value and actively considered how it should guide future behaviour, professional conduct, and ethical decision-making. Evidence of Characterisation was also again observed among a smaller group of participants. These students articulated integrity as a personal standard that would continue to guide their actions regardless of external monitoring or situational pressures. Their discussion reflected the emergence of integrity as part of their professional identity and long-term behavioural commitments. Based on the last theme, students' recommendations for more experiential learning, profession-specific case studies, guest speakers, and field-based activities indicate that they view integrity formation as a continuous developmental process. Rather than advocating for more theoretical content, participants consistently called for opportunities to experience, reflect upon, and practise integrity in authentic contexts. This suggests that the internalisation of integrity is strengthened when students can connect ethical principles with real-life situations, emotional experiences, and future professional responsibilities.

Conclusion

Integrity internalisation was evident across three progressive levels. Students first recognised the importance of integrity (valuing), subsequently integrated integrity into their personal decision-making processes (organisation), and finally described integrity as a stable part of their personal and professional identity (characterisation) which also refers to internalisation (Wu et al., 2025; Zittoun and Gillespie, 2015; Krathwohl et al., 1964). This study found that students entered the KIAR course with a generally positive understanding of integrity rooted in honesty, family upbringing, religious values, and adherence to rules. Through participation in KIAR, their understanding expanded from a personal moral value to a broader socio-politic, civic, and professional responsibility. The finding further revealed that integrity internalisation occurred through experiential learning, ethical reflection, and engagement with real-world cases. While most students demonstrated the Valuing and Organization levels of Krathwohl's effective domain (Krathwohl et al., 1964), a smaller group exhibited evidence of Characterization, where integrity had become part of their personal identity and behavioural orientation. Finally, students viewed integrity formation as a continuous process that extends beyond university life. Reflecting on previous studies on KIAR (Mohammed et al., 2024; Zin et al., 2023), the interpersonal communication context of their experiences with issues of integrity were limited and underexplored in which future research could contribute. In addition, none of these studies attempted to invite students who have graduated and are working in professional settings to share their real-life experiences of integrity and corruption. We highly recommend that these real-life experiences be used as case studies for discussion in KIAR. Their recommendations for more relatable case studies, active learning and practical engagement suggest that integrity education is most

effective when it is contextualised, experiential and connected to real-world professional and social challenges.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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