

## Character Education at Universities

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### Abstract

*Character education is a movement geared towards improving positive character traits in students. It takes place in all levels of formal educational institutions including universities. This article is part of a research which was both quantitative and qualitative, conducted at two state universities involving 45 academics and 260 university students from four types of faculties: Education, Arts and Sciences, Economics and Administrative Sciences, Engineering. Their responses were written by themselves as a reply to an open-ended question at the end of a questionnaire and analyzed through content analysis. The results included findings such as the lateness of starting character education at tertiary level, the significance of academics' being role models in giving direction to students' character development, the importance of students' peers on their character, the possible benefits of character education courses, the influence of extra-curricular activities on students' character and the family factor in shaping character.*

**Keywords:** Higher education, character education

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. What is character education?

Character education could be defined as a school-based activity which shapes students' behavior systematically (Lockwood 1997 quoted in Arthur 2003). In Lockwood's view, it is a school-based program designed in collaboration with other social institutions having the aim of giving form to young people's behavior directly and systematically by explicitly influencing universal values so as to result in a specific behavior. Character education is related with these: academic motivation and objectives, academic success, behavior that supports society, commitment to democratic values, conflict resolution skills, moral judgmental maturity, responsibility, respect, self-efficacy, self-respect, self-control, social skills, trust and respect towards teachers (Berkowitz and Bier 2004). In character education, there is a common belief that the majority of people in society thinks that care, honesty, fairness, responsibility, respect to others and self are among important ethical values. Character education claims that these values verify the value of human beings and this fact has brought the validity of the aforementioned values and the responsibility of people's supporting them (Lickona, Schaps, Lewis 1998). The duty of character education is, to help children and all the other members of a learning society to know what is good, value it and act upon it.

### 1.2. What are the aims of character education?

In character education, improving virtues is the essence (Ryan and Bohlin 1999 quoted in Milson and Chu 2002). Virtues are behaviors that have become habits, evaluated as morally perfect. A person's character is a combination of virtues that are morally good habits and bad traits that are habits against morality. In the most general sense, character education is trying to encourage the improvement of moral behavior. Character education has these key objectives (Brown and Benjamin 2003): \* Respect to self and others \* Qualities of responsible citizenship \* Higher academic

achievement \* Developed relationships between people \* More self-discipline \* Fewer behavior problems \* Continuous focus on safe schools \* Positive school culture \* Advanced employment skills. A good education is holistic in terms of aims and implementation; it is not geared only towards the intellect but also attitudes, values, behaviors and tendencies.

### 1.3. Why is character education needed?

In addition to the opinions and expectations of managers, teachers and parents, the new conditions of the world, that has been undergoing a revolutionary transformation, increase the need for character education (Ekşi 2003). Globalism has been eliminating borders and enabling dominant cultures to be observed at all times everywhere. In Turkey's case, the disappearance of some sensitivity provides a sufficient reason for character education. Increasing number of examples showing the need for character education are also verified through statistics and teachers' observations: Disobedience to parents or teachers; addiction to substances; increasing rates of suicide, self-destruction, violence, fraud; decrease in work ethics and social responsibility (Kagan 2001, Lickona 1991, Ryan 1996 quoted in Ekşi 2003).

There are different points of view regarding character education programmes and they could be categorised below three titles: 1. Reasoning – habit: Some approaches emphasize an individual's moral reasoning and thinking whereas others highlight the implementation of virtuous behaviour until it becomes a habit. 2. "High" values – "Minor" values: In some approaches, fundamental values are given importance such as self-discipline, courage, loyalty and perseverance while in others, side values like care, politeness and friendship are prized. 3. Focus on individual – Focus on environment and society: Questions such as "Is character for an individual?" or "Should character address the norms of a group?" determine different stances of diverse perspectives in character education. (Thomas 1991 quoted in Dilmaç 2007).

By nature, character education is a study that contains a lot of sciences. It is necessary for both the advocates and critics to ask various questions and use different methods while approaching the topic. The discussion about character education brings with it some conflicts. As a result of the variety of approaches, surprising kinds of educational systems and programmes have emerged. Leming believes that the existence of too many academic views prevents the effective improvement of character education as a course (Leming 1993 quoted in Arthur 2003).

## 2. Research Method

This research is a qualitative part of a larger study which included a Likert scale as well as an open-ended question. This article will deal with the responses to the open-ended question. The participants were academics and university students. 64 academics replied the question but 45 answers were eligible to analyze. The percentage of the academics who replied the open-ended question in all of the valid questionnaires was 17 %. The number of students who replied the question was 271, yet 260 answers were appropriate to analyze. The percentage of the students who replied the open-ended question in all of the valid questionnaires was 12 %.

Content analysis was conducted to analyze the data. In this kind of analysis, the classifications that contain the facts are basically descriptive (Maxwell 2005). Content analysis divides the data into suitable categories and displays the summary of data in statistics or graphics or tables (Simon 1969). These categories need to be homogenous, discriminating, objective, holistic, meaningful and appropriate for purpose (Bilgin 2006). It is one of the most common approaches of content analysis (Neuendorf 2002; Hardy and Bryman 2006).

The open-ended question was: "If you would like to express your ideas about the subject (Character education at higher education), please add them below." The expected answer to an open-ended question is a word, phrase or a long comment. The simple expressions of answers which were out of topic were not taken into consideration and the ones which were similar were grouped together as indicated in literature (Munn and Drever 1996). The similar ones were examined and the

common points were decided, hence the categories were defined. In short, the answers that gave the same meaning were named. In order to see the number of alike or same answers, frequency tables were shown in terms of faculty types. The answers were separated into two groups of participants: students and academics. The data were ordered logically, the classifications were interpreted and the results were reached.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Findings from academics' responses to the open-ended question

Out of 45 valid answers, the highest number of participants is from the faculties of Education with 17 whereas the smallest number is from the faculties of Engineering with 4. It is understood that the most interested academics are from the faculties of Education. It is also seen that academics in humanities and social sciences are almost equally interested in character education with close numbers, 13 and 11 respectively. The number of academics who responded to the open-ended question in engineering sciences is approximately one-fourth of those in educational sciences. With the implementation of content analysis, 11 categories emerged and the themes with the number of answers for each one are as follows. It should be noted that in each answer, there could be more than one theme and hence, the same answer offered multiple categories.

**Table 1** Categories Formed by Academics' Responses

No	Category	Number of total responses	Education	Arts and Sciences	Economics-Administrative Sciences	Engineering
1	It is rather late to start character education during university years.	24	11	5	6	2
2	Character education is not taken as a basis in courses and extra-curricular activities at universities.	4	3	1		
3	Character education needs to take place in every step of formal education including tertiary level.	8	6	1	1	
4	The main duty of universities is not character education and they only contribute to it.	12	3	4	4	1
5	The most effective factor in character education is the behavior of academics and their being role models to their students.	12	2	7	1	2
6	Character education can happen through extra-curricular activities at universities (such as seminars, social and sports activities and the like).	5	3	2		
7	The most important element in character education is family.	15	2	9	3	1
8	For character education, non-governmental organizations have a responsibility as well.	2	1	1		
9	Offering character education courses is not seen appropriate as such courses will not have a beneficial effect.	6	1	1	1	3
10	Ethics or philosophy courses need to be required for all students at universities.	3		1	1	1
11	If character education courses are offered at universities, they could be useful.	3	1	2		

As seen in Table 1, for some categories no ideas emerged from three faculty types. For four categories (numbered 2, 6, 8, and 11), academics from neither the Engineering nor the Economics and Administrative Sciences faculties expressed any opinions. For each category, views were expressed from the faculties of Arts and Sciences and the reason for this might be the possibility that academics in humanities may regard the concept of character directly related with their field. The only category that no academic shared a view from the faculties of Education was number 10, namely "Ethics or philosophy courses need to be required for all students at universities." The explanation for this could be that academics at that faculty may believe that such courses are not appropriate for the content of education courses and humanities cover these courses more suitably. For the categories numbered 4, 5, 7, and 11, it is indicated that the numbers of academics in the faculties of Arts and Sciences are higher than those in the faculties of Education. This result could be explained by the fact that sciences such as psychology, philosophy, and sociology are directly interested in subjects like character, character education and character improvement. The reason why most academics believing that it is rather late to start character education during university years were from the faculties of Education could be based on the possibility that they think the starting age for character education is within the pre-school period, in other words character education first begins in the family.

**Table 2** Frequency Table of Combined Categories Based on Faculty Types

Title	Category no	Education	Arts and Sciences	Economics and Administrative Sciences	Engineering	Total
When should there be character education?	1,3	17	6	7	2	32
Should there be character education at universities?	2,4,6	9	7	4	1	21
What are the important factors/Who are important in character education?	5,7,8	5	17	4	3	29
Should courses towards character education be opened?	9,10,11	2	4	2	4	12

The above-mentioned eleven categories were combined and reformulated in questions so as to indicate four general ideas. With fewer details, these inclusive holistic categories point out the common aspects of detailed categories. Therefore, they highlight the common concerns of academics from different faculties. As the figures show in Table 2, for the first and second combined categories, the academics who thought most about the topic were from the faculties of Education. For the third category, those who expressed themselves most were from the faculties of Arts and Sciences. For the last category, those who shared their views most were from the faculties of Engineering and Arts and Sciences.

### 3.2. Findings from students' responses

**Table 3** Distribution of Students' Responses to the Open-Ended Question Based on Faculty Types

Faculty	Number of answers	Percentage (%)
Education	158	60.7
Arts and Sciences	51	19.6
Economics and Administrative Sciences	31	11.9
Engineering	20	7.6

It is seen in Table 3 that the students who were interested in the research topic most were from the faculties of Education. Those who were least interested were from the faculties of Engineering. As the

figures indicate more students from the faculties of Arts and Sciences were interested than those from the faculties of Economics and Administrative Sciences.

The classifications were made by repeated themes. Since there were ideas for more than one category in the same answer, the answer may appear below multiple categories. As there were 260 answers in total, 43 categories were identified at first and they were qualified as sub-categories. They were re-analyzed and those which shared common points were grouped. The top categories emerged and there were 10 of them. Below is Table 4 that shows the top 10 categories with the number of answers for each.

**Table 4** The Frequency Table of Top Categories for Students

No	Category title	Total number of answers	Edu.	Arts-Scie.	Eco.-Admin. Scie.	Eng.
1	The state of universities as institutions in character education	80	46	19	11	4
2	The role of academics in character education	68	39	15	10	4
3	Character education during university years	62	34	9	9	10
4	Extra-curricular character education at universities	46	30	5	7	4
5	Including character education in the curriculum	35	24	4	6	1
6	The family factor in character education	28	18	4	5	1
7	The stance of university students in character education	26	20	3		3
8	The period of character education	21	15	4	1	1
9	The relationship between character education and society	18	7	6		5
10	The connection between values system along with morality and character education	16	13	2		1

It is understood that the most occurring theme for students was the state of universities as institutions in character education. Since this is the first issue in their minds, they must question the role of the university they are registered in with regard to character education. The reason could be that they might evaluate the university critically, where they are stakeholders. The issue they mentioned least frequently was the connection between values system along with morality and character education. This situation may be explained by the disappearance of many values in today's society and the less importance given to morality, therefore causing students not to think much about values and morality. In other words, it is highly probable that they do not often remember morality and values system and hence, they do not relate these concepts to character education. As can be seen above, no ideas were offered for categories numbered 7, 9, and 10 from the students of the faculties of Economics and Administrative Sciences.

#### 4. Discussion

The results should be approached cautiously that the number of participants whose answers were analyzed was 305 in total out of 2417 valid questionnaires, on which a Likert scale was given. Hence, the 305 academics and students do not represent all of the participants. The participants, who replied

the open-ended question, seemed to have thought on character education and those who expressed problems appeared to have been disturbed by some situations.

Regarding the open-ended question, the first sub-aim was "Is the teaching of character education necessary for academics and students?". Two categories by academics' responses were: 1. Character education needs to take place in every step of formal education including tertiary level. 2. If character education courses are offered at universities, they could be useful. Nine sub-categories that support a positive reply to the question by students were: 1. Higher education needs to be a step of maturity for character education. 2. Character education must be emphasized in current courses. 3. Character education is extremely important for societies' development. 4. Character education continues during lifetime. 5. Positive character traits and concepts must be introduced at faculties of education. 6. Universities are inefficient in character education. 7. University education is not as it needs to be and students' characters are influenced negatively by this situation. 8. Universities are not merely institutions that enable students to acquire professions. 9. Through character education, positive qualities of people could be improved and negative qualities could be eliminated.

The second sub-aim of the open-ended question was "If necessary, what kind of problems is character education expected to solve?". Three academics had the idea that all students needed ethics or philosophy courses. The reasons for this could result from their opinion that students were not aware of concepts of ethics and morality, and also did not practice intellectual activities often which would enable them to be skilled in distinguishing the good from the bad, deducing, and reflective thinking in order to make right decisions. Teacher education programs must create other methods so as to make teacher candidate students to understand their future role and predict the moral and ethical significance of their own practices. Moral representation is not an inevitable situation originating from by just being a teacher; it is a professional quality that shows ethical practices as model. This must not be left to chance and it must be improved with goals by teaching ethics to pre-service teacher candidates (Soltis 1986 quoted in Campbell 1997). Higher education has a role in preparing education professionals and these professionals reflect minimum acceptable professional ethics that is similar to moral conscience or ideas of moral character. Although some universities established policies on professional ethics for students and academics such as on scientific plagiarism, in the mission statements or information regarding the curriculum of many universities, moral education or character education or character development does not exist (Reetz and Jacobs 1999).

The third sub-aim of the open-ended question was "Through what sorts of methods could character education be / is character education given?". When the categories of academics are taken into account, these themes are noticed: 1. The most effective factor in character education is the behavior of academics and their being role models to their students. 2. Character education can happen through extra-curricular activities at universities (such as seminars, social and sports activities and the like). 3. If character education courses are offered at universities, they could be useful. To look at the themes closely, the first one expresses that character education can be offered through the behavior of academics and it is already given by positive examples. The second method contains extra-curricular activities; broadly explained various scientific gatherings such as seminars, social activities, sports competitions and cultural events of all sorts within the university and outside classrooms. Lastly, offering character education courses is suggested as one of the methods of delivering character education (Silay 2010).

When students' categories are taken into account, these themes emerge: 1. Academics must exhibit behaviors that will be taken as models. 2. Academics must allocate time to their students by communicating with them and share their experiences. 3. Character improvement courses will be useful. 4. Psychology course must be given importance 5. Character education courses will be effective. 6. The facilities regarding character education must be restructured according to students' expectations. 7. The most influential factor in educating students' characters is other students. 8. Character education may be delivered through activities at university.

University prepares individuals for life, in other words it is the location where they learn healthy interaction with their friends, acquaintances and colleagues within the society. This is why social venues and activities must be given importance with the aim of making such interactions possible.

Plays organized by students, seminars, parties, elections are examples of such social and cultural events (Oğuz 1992 quoted in Hacifazlıoğlu 2006). While generally cultural, social, artistic and sports events are regarded as university activities, they also include accommodation, food and health services (Cabal 1993 quoted in Hacifazlıoğlu 2006). It is clear that students' dean's office, students' council and students' club have positive effects on students' character. The importance of these entities is understood by establishing the concept of democracy, being fair and transparent, recognizing citizenship responsibilities, internalizing moral principles such as honesty (Hacifazlıoğlu 2006).

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, some recommendations to universities could include these: 1. Non-credit elective courses for students of all sciences may be offered for a maximum of two semesters as pilot study. Such courses could have different points of focus while maintaining the connection with character education and some examples for their titles might be "Moral philosophy and character", "Character concept in psychology", "Values and character link", "Work ethics and character". 2. As the influence of academics on their students is not arguable, their self-awareness regarding being role models is of utmost importance. It should be kept in mind that among the most direct ways of conveying character education, academics' exemplary behavior, the words they choose while talking, their interaction with their students, and their reaction towards their students could be listed. 3. Scientific meetings on character education should be organized frequently, yet so as to attract students the titles of such gatherings could be understandable and interesting; for instance "While starting life", "For post-university", "Why higher education?", and "University within life". 4. The number of social, cultural, and sports activities could be increased and some may be organized at weekends both in and out of campus. The frequency could be raised and also, the variety of such events may be aimed at. Artists, actors and sportspeople might be invited to universities.

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