

Strengthening Spiritual Development Approaches in Teaching and Learning for Malaysian Higher Education Students: An Integrative Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper explores the integration of spiritual development within teaching and learning processes in Malaysian higher education institutions. Rooted in the Islamic worldview, it argues that education must nurture not only intellectual capabilities but also emotional and spiritual dimensions. Despite growing awareness, spiritual values remain marginalised in mainstream curricula. The paper critically engages with theoretical frameworks, notably King's (2008) and Vaughan's (2002) models of spiritual intelligence, alongside Islamic principles such as ta'dib, adab, and ihsan. A new conceptual framework is proposed, visually mapping the relationships between values, pedagogy, institutional policy, and student outcomes. The paper synthesizes literature and highlights evaluative insights into best practices and challenges, offering recommendations for systemic reform. It concludes by outlining future research directions to empirically assess the proposed framework's efficacy.

Keywords: Spiritual Development, Higher Education, Islamic Pedagogy, Holistic Education, Student Wellbeing, Spiritual Intelligence, Conceptual Framework

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, higher education institutions face challenges in producing not only intellectually competent graduates but also morally responsible and spiritually resilient individuals. The overemphasis on material success and academic achievement has sidelined the spiritual and ethical dimensions of education. From the Islamic perspective, education is a holistic process (ta'dib), encompassing intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual development. However, this principle is often missing from current curricula in Malaysian universities.

This concern is particularly pressing in Malaysia, where the educational landscape remains largely exam-oriented and output-driven. Although national philosophies emphasise holistic and value-based learning, the actual implementation of spiritual elements in curricula is sporadic. This disconnect between policy ideals and institutional implementation often results in graduates who are intellectually proficient but lack moral grounding and spiritual awareness. Hence, a more systematic and integrative approach is required. This observation is supported by Hamzah, Ismail, and Noor (2023), who found that despite philosophical emphasis on holistic development, actual curricular practices often neglect spiritual dimensions in favour of cognitive and technical skills. While academic achievements remain a primary objective, contemporary scholars and educators have increasingly voiced concern over the lack of emphasis on the affective and spiritual dimensions of student growth (Ellin, Shahrin, & Arifin, 2023).

Despite this, in many modern Malaysian universities and other Muslim-majority nations, spirituality is often treated as separate from mainstream academic pursuits. While various co-curricular activities such as religious talks, Islamic societies, and campus mosques provide avenues for spiritual engagement, these efforts are usually informal, extracurricular, and inconsistent across disciplines (Bahrami, 2016). Formal curricula often lack integration of spiritual elements, and the pedagogical approaches used rarely take into account the spiritual dimension of the learner.

Additionally, many educators in higher learning institutions lack sufficient exposure, training, or motivation to engage with students on spiritual matters. This disconnect is compounded by institutional structures that prioritise measurable academic outputs over intangible yet vital aspects of character and faith development (Menon, Ismail, & Yahya, 2023). As a result, students may graduate with excellent academic records but struggle with identity, purpose, emotional wellbeing, and ethical decision-making.

There is a growing dissonance between intellectual excellence and moral-spiritual maturity. Although universities strive to produce well-rounded graduates, the lack of structured frameworks for nurturing students' spiritual growth within classroom contexts hinders the formation of holistic individuals. This neglect may result in graduates who are academically competent but spiritually disconnected.

Objectives of the Paper:

1. To explore the concept of spiritual development in higher education from an Islamic perspective, highlighting its theoretical foundations.
2. To identify the importance and relevance of integrating spiritual development into the formation of holistic students at Malaysian higher education institutions.
3. To propose practical approaches and strategies for embedding spiritual elements into teaching and learning processes across various academic disciplines.
4. To examine current challenges in the implementation of spiritually integrated education and suggest recommendations for systemic and pedagogical improvement.

Through these aims, the paper seeks to advocate for a more holistic and spiritually conscious model of education that aligns with Islamic values and the broader goal of producing graduates who are intellectually grounded, emotionally balanced, ethically principled, and spiritually connected.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Spiritual development in higher education has garnered increasing attention in recent decades due to its essential role in shaping students' character, emotional balance, and moral decision-making. The integration of spirituality in educational settings is no longer viewed as an optional or purely religious practice, but as a crucial component of holistic education (Bahrami, 2016; Vaughan, 2002). This section reviews key theories, concepts, and empirical findings relevant to spiritual development in both Islamic and global educational contexts.

Spiritual Development in Islamic Education

Islamic education views spirituality (ruhaniyyah) as central to holistic personal development. Concepts such as ta'dib, adab, and ihsan aim to nurture the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical aspects of the individual. As Al-Attas (1991) emphasized, education is not limited to knowledge acquisition but encompasses moral character (akhlaq), wisdom (hikmah), and the consciousness of God (taqwa). The concept of tarbiyyah further encompasses spiritual nurturing alongside intellectual and physical training, aiming to produce an individual who is balanced, virtuous, and aware of their purpose as khalifah (vicegerent) on Earth.

Studies such as those by Abdullah et al. (2018) and Yusof & Ismail (2016) confirm that students who are exposed to spiritual teachings in their university environment tend to develop stronger ethical awareness, emotional maturity, and academic integrity. These outcomes are consistent with the objectives of Islamic education, which include the formation of spiritually resilient individuals capable of navigating contemporary moral challenges.

Models of Spiritual Intelligence

King (2008) and Vaughan (2002) introduced spiritual intelligence as a framework to understand existential awareness and moral decision-making. King's model emphasizes critical existential thinking, personal meaning production, and transcendental awareness. Vaughan focuses on intuitive and integrative knowledge. These are compared with Islamic concepts that place spirituality within a divine framework.

In the context of higher education, spiritual intelligence is increasingly recognized as complementing intellectual (IQ) and emotional intelligence (EQ), contributing to well-rounded personal and academic growth. Students with

higher SQ are better equipped to manage stress, build meaningful relationships, and remain grounded in their values amidst external pressures (Ellin et al., 2023).

Empirical Studies in Malaysia

In Malaysia, empirical studies by UMP (2023), Hamzah et al. (2023), and Ellin et al. (2023) demonstrate the positive impact of structured spiritual modules on students' wellbeing, engagement, and ethical reasoning.

For instance, the University Malaysia Pahang (UMP) introduced the Student Holistic Empowerment Program, which includes modules on spiritual intelligence and self-awareness, aiming to strengthen students' emotional wellbeing and sense of responsibility (UMP, 2023). Hamzah et al. (2023) examined how non-Muslim students responded positively to spiritual education components when presented in a universal and inclusive manner. Their study highlighted the potential for spiritual values to foster unity, empathy, and self-reflection regardless of religious background. Similarly, Ellin et al. (2023) found that Muslim students who participated in structured spiritual development activities reported greater happiness and resilience during their undergraduate studies. Menon et al. (2023) tested a "Spiritual Circle Module" with gifted learners in a digital learning environment and observed increased engagement, respect, and critical thinking. These findings suggest that spiritual content can be effectively delivered through both face-to-face and online learning modalities.

Global Perspectives on Spirituality in Education

Internationally, the concept of spirituality in education has evolved beyond religious instruction to include mindfulness, values education, and contemplative pedagogy. Chickering and Reisser (1993) proposed that college students experience identity formation through spiritual reflection, helping them develop a sense of purpose, integrity, and inner coherence. Western institutions increasingly incorporate reflective practices, ethical discourse, and student wellbeing programs into the curriculum to support holistic development. For example, Bahrami (2016) advocated for digital spiritual wellbeing strategies that support students' moral agency and emotional health in online education settings.

Theoretical and Conceptual Gaps

Despite the promising evidence, there remains a lack of theoretical clarity and consistency in how spirituality is defined and operationalized across institutions. Many programs focus only on surface-level moral teaching without addressing deeper inner transformation or connection with transcendence. In the Islamic context, the challenge lies in translating spiritual concepts such as tawhid (oneness of God), ihsan (excellence), and tazkiyah (purification) into contemporary pedagogical models that resonate with modern learners.

Furthermore, the implementation of spiritual development initiatives often depends on the individual lecturer's motivation, institutional support, or religious affiliation, rather than being embedded within official curricula or strategic frameworks. Islamic scholars assert that spiritual development is integral to a person's relationship with the Creator and the self. It encompasses aspects such as taqwa, sincerity, patience, and self-reflection. Chickering and Reisser (1993) identified dimensions of personal development, including spiritual identity. More recent studies like King (2008) and Vaughan (2002) introduced the concept of spiritual intelligence, which includes critical existential thinking and transcendental awareness.

These findings align with Bahrami (2016), who found that spiritual growth contributes to a meaningful academic experience and enhances ethical decision-making among university students. Kholid and Riyono (2023) found that spirituality positively influences students' academic engagement, primarily through increased achievement motivation and resilience. Similarly, Alizadeh and Babaei (2021) reported a significant positive relationship between spiritual intelligence, academic motivation, and vitality among medical students. In contrast, Yusof, Nor, and Rahman (2021) observed a weak and statistically non-significant correlation between spiritual intelligence and academic integrity, suggesting that while a link may exist, it requires further investigation.

Comparative Analysis of Theoretical Frameworks

King's (2008) spiritual intelligence model emphasises existential reflection, meaning-making, and

transcendental awareness. Vaughan (2002) builds on this by highlighting intuition and unity of consciousness. These Western-origin models reflect individualistic and psychological perspectives. In contrast, the Islamic framework anchored in ta'dib and ihsan positions spirituality as inherently relational, God-conscious, and ethically grounded. This comparative analysis reveals that while both paradigms aim for inner transformation, the Islamic model situates this within a divine ontological framework, thereby enriching the theoretical discourse.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This methodology is particularly appropriate for topics like spiritual development, where meaning, philosophy, and values play a central role and cannot be easily quantified.

Research Design

This paper employs a conceptual qualitative methodology grounded in document analysis. It synthesises scholarly literature and policy texts to construct a theoretical framework on spiritual development in higher education, particularly from an Islamic pedagogical lens.

Data Sources

The data for this conceptual paper is derived from secondary sources, including:

Peer-reviewed journal articles from databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and Web of Science; Books and academic publications on Islamic education, spiritual intelligence, and holistic development; Reports and guidelines from higher education institutions University Malaysia Pahang [UMP], International Islamic University Malaysia [IIUM]); Malaysian education policy documents such as the National Education Philosophy, Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025, and other relevant ministerial circulars.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis involved thematic content analysis and narrative synthesis. First, relevant literature was screened and coded according to major emerging themes such as: (i) definition and scope of spiritual development, (ii) models of spiritual intelligence, (iii) existing spiritual education practices in higher education, (iv) pedagogical strategies, and (v) implementation challenges.

These themes were then analysed and discussed using a combination of Islamic epistemological principles (tarbiyyah, adab, akhlaq) and contemporary educational frameworks (spiritual intelligence models by King [2008] and Vaughan [2002]).

FINDINGS

This section synthesises the key findings that emerge from the reviewed literature on spiritual development in higher education, particularly in the Malaysian context, while also drawing insights from international studies. The findings are organized into several thematic categories that reflect both conceptual and practical dimensions of spirituality in education.

The Role of Spiritual Development in Student Wellbeing and Character Formation

Empirical and conceptual literature consistently highlights that students exposed to spiritually integrated education report greater ethical awareness, emotional resilience, and psychological wellbeing (Abdullah et al., 2018; Ellin et al., 2023).

In particular, spiritual intelligence, the capacity to derive meaning, purpose, and moral direction has been linked to lower levels of anxiety and depression, and higher levels of self-confidence and motivation among university students (King, 2008; Vaughan, 2002). This suggests that spiritual development is not merely religious in

function but has psychological and developmental benefits.

Integration of Spiritual Elements into Teaching and Learning

Empirical studies show that integrating spiritual values into the curriculum can be effective when done intentionally and systematically. For instance, University Malaysia Pahang (UMP) implemented a spiritual intelligence module aimed at enhancing students' self-awareness, sense of purpose, and ethical behaviour. Students participating in the program exhibited greater engagement with moral reasoning and community involvement (UMP, 2023).

Similarly, Menon et al. (2023) designed a "Spiritual Circle Module" for gifted students in digital learning environments. The program fostered values such as empathy, gratitude, and mutual respect, and encouraged reflective learning practices. These studies demonstrate that spirituality can be successfully embedded into various delivery modes whether face-to-face or online provided that the content and facilitation are thoughtfully constructed.

Perceptions and Attitudes Among Educators and Students

Another key finding is the diverse range of perceptions held by educators and students regarding the role of spirituality in education. Hamzah et al. (2023) conducted a qualitative study on non-Muslim students at Malaysian public universities and found that many were receptive to spiritual education, provided it was framed in a universal and inclusive manner. This indicates that spiritual values such as compassion, honesty, and purpose can transcend religious boundaries when approached through a shared human values lens.

However, challenges remain. Some lecturers feel ill-equipped to incorporate spirituality into their teaching due to a lack of training, institutional support, or clarity on how to balance secular content with spiritual values (Bahrami, 2016). Students, on the other hand, may see spirituality as irrelevant to their academic success unless the relevance is made explicit through practical examples and applications.

Gaps in Policy and Implementation Frameworks

While national education policies such as the Malaysian Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025 emphasise holistic student development, there is a lack of clear frameworks or guidelines for how spiritual development should be integrated at the institutional level. Many universities rely on extracurricular religious programmes without embedding these elements into the formal curriculum (Yusof & Ismail, 2016).

Furthermore, the implementation of spiritual initiatives tends to vary significantly between institutions and even among departments within the same institution. This inconsistency reflects an absence of systemic commitment to spiritual education, despite its recognised benefits.

The framework illustrates the flow from core spiritual values to teaching strategies, institutional support, and student outcomes.

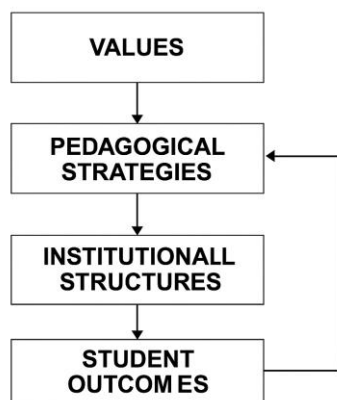


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Spiritual Development in Higher Education

Emerging Best Practices

Despite the challenges, the literature also reveals several promising practices:

1. The use of reflective journaling and values-based assignments in courses such as ethics, literature, or leadership.
2. Faculty training workshops on value-based pedagogy.
3. Integration of service-learning projects that connect students with real-life moral and social issues.
4. Campus-wide initiatives such as weekly spiritual reflections, gratitude circles, and peer support groups.

These practices support the notion that spiritual development can be cultivated in a diverse range of disciplines, including science, engineering, business, and medicine not only in religious studies programmes.

Table 1: Comparative Summary of Best Practices in Spiritual Pedagogy

Practice	Institution	Outcomes	Challenges	Alignment with Goals
Spiritual Intelligence Module	UMP	Ethical awareness, self-reflection	Limited scalability	High
Spiritual Circle Module	Menon et al.	Empathy, mindfulness	Requires trained facilitators	High
Reflective Journaling	Multiple IPTAs	Inner awareness	Assessment complexity	Moderate

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The preceding findings affirm that spiritual development plays a crucial role in shaping well-rounded, morally resilient, and purpose-driven university students. Despite aspirations for holistic education, the absence of structured frameworks has led to a disconnect between intellectual achievement and spiritual maturity. This paper therefore calls for institutional and pedagogical strategies that embed spirituality as a core educational component.

The Need for a Paradigm Shift in Higher Education

Contemporary higher education is still largely driven by cognitive and technical objectives, often measured through quantifiable academic outcomes such as grades, employability, and research productivity. While these are important, they do not capture the full essence of what it means to be a holistic graduate. As noted by Bahrami (2016), the neglect of spiritual and emotional development contributes to student stress, anxiety, and loss of meaning in academic pursuits.

A paradigm shift is needed to reposition education as a process of humanization (*insaniyyah*), where students are nurtured not only as future professionals but also as ethically grounded individuals with spiritual depth. This aligns with the Islamic goal of education, which is to develop the servant (*‘abd*) and vicegerent (*khalifah*) of Allah through balanced intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth (Zaid Ahmad & Mastor, 2019).

Institutional Challenges

Several institutional-level challenges hinder the integration of spiritual development into teaching and learning:

1. **Lack of Policy Direction:** Despite national policies promoting holistic education, most universities do not have clear institutional strategies or frameworks for embedding spirituality into academic programmes (Yusof & Ismail, 2016).
2. **Limited Professional Development:** Educators are often untrained or unaware of methods to incorporate spiritual values into their subject matter. There is also limited research culture around

spiritual pedagogy.

3. **Siloed Implementation:** Spirituality is frequently confined to Islamic studies or co-curricular activities, creating a disconnect between formal academic disciplines and students' spiritual needs.
4. **Cultural Misconceptions:** In pluralistic academic environments, spirituality is sometimes misunderstood as synonymous with religious preaching, which can lead to resistance among faculty or students from diverse backgrounds.

Student-Level Challenges

From the student perspective, several barriers to spiritual engagement were highlighted in the literature:

1. **Perception of Irrelevance:** Many students view spirituality as unrelated to academic performance or career success unless its benefits are made explicit.
2. **Fragmented Exposure:** Spiritual values are often presented in isolation, without linking them to real-life challenges or academic content.
3. **Peer Pressure and Social Norms:** Students may struggle to express or explore spiritual concerns in environments that prioritise performance, competition, or consumerist values (Ellin et al., 2023).

Strategic Recommendations

Practical integration of spiritual values in the classroom can be achieved through various instructional strategies that promote introspection, ethical reasoning, and community engagement. For instance, reflective journaling on spiritual themes encourages students to document their personal thoughts on gratitude, purpose, compassion, and challenges faced in life, thereby cultivating self-awareness and inner growth. This practice not only enhances emotional intelligence but also supports the development of moral reasoning aligned with spiritual consciousness.

In addition, the integration of ethical dilemmas in case studies such as those involving justice, honesty, or trust in business, science, or medical scenarios provides students with structured opportunities to analyse real-world problems through the lens of both rationality and spiritual ethics. This encourages critical thinking while reinforcing core values like fairness ('adl) and sincerity (ikhlas).

Another meaningful practice is the inclusion of student-led spiritual reflection circles, where students are given space to share reflections, stories, or even Quranic verses (or universal spiritual texts) that resonate with their personal experiences. These informal yet guided sessions can foster a sense of belonging, empathy, and mutual respect across diverse student backgrounds. They also reinforce the spiritual dimension as a shared human value, transcending religious boundaries.

Emphasising Inclusivity and Universal Values

To address the multicultural and multifaith nature of many Malaysian universities, spirituality should be framed through universal values that resonate with all students. This includes values like gratitude, compassion, accountability, mindfulness, and a sense of higher purpose. As shown in Hamzah et al. (2023), even non-Muslim students responded positively to spiritual content when presented as part of human development rather than religious obligation.

Although this framework is rooted in Islamic educational philosophy, its underlying values such as gratitude, honesty, justice, humility, and compassion are universal in nature and resonate across cultures and religions. To ensure inclusivity in multifaith or secular institutions, spiritual elements can be presented using a humanistic or values-based approach rather than a religiously prescriptive tone. For example, reflection activities may invite students to explore personal purpose, ethical dilemmas, or acts of kindness from their own worldviews. This promotes mutual respect, intercultural understanding, and a shared commitment to moral integrity regardless of religious background.

Limitations of the Study

This study is conceptual in nature and therefore does not include empirical data to validate the proposed

framework. The absence of field-based observations, interviews, or quantitative assessments limits the ability to generalize its practical effectiveness across institutions. In addition, the framework is primarily grounded in Islamic epistemology, which may require further adaptation when applied to non-Islamic or secular environments. Future research should include pilot implementations in diverse higher education settings, with both Muslim and non-Muslim participants, to evaluate the framework's relevance, adaptability, and outcomes in real teaching and learning contexts.

CONCLUSION

This paper is conceptual in nature and does not include empirical data. Future research should focus on pilot implementations and surveys to evaluate the practicality and impact of the proposed framework.

The integration of spiritual development into higher education is not merely a complementary feature, but a foundational element in the formation of holistic, ethical, and resilient graduates. As this conceptual paper has demonstrated, the neglect of the spiritual dimension in modern academic settings poses a risk of producing intellectually capable individuals who may nonetheless struggle with emotional instability, ethical ambiguity, and a lack of purpose.

Islamic educational philosophy clearly emphasises the balanced development of the human being, encompassing physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth (Abdullah et al., 2018; Zaid Ahmad & Mastor, 2019). The findings discussed in this paper, drawn from both local and international studies, support this worldview and affirm that spiritual intelligence is closely linked with personal wellbeing, moral behaviour, and academic success.

However, the review also uncovered significant challenges in implementing spiritual development effectively within the structures of higher education. These include a lack of institutional frameworks, inconsistent pedagogical strategies, and inadequate training for educators. Students, meanwhile, often perceive spirituality as disconnected from academic and professional development unless its relevance is clearly articulated and integrated into the learning experience (Ellin et al., 2023; Bahrami, 2016).

Looking forward, the conceptual insights offered in this paper provide a solid foundation for future empirical research and policy innovation. Researchers may build on this model by investigating specific interventions, measuring the impact of spiritual pedagogy, or exploring how different religious and cultural contexts influence spiritual development in higher education.

Ultimately, the true success of a higher education institution is not solely measured by its academic output or global rankings, but by the integrity, compassion, and sense of divine purpose embodied by its graduates.

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