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Character Development and Responsible Citizenship Among University Students in Nigeria: Examining the Role of Higher Education

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Abstract	Nigerian universities are formally charged, under national policy, with producing graduates who are not merely academically competent but also possessed of sound character and a disposition toward responsible citizenship. Yet campus life in Nigeria continues to be marked by cultism, examination malpractice, corruption tolerance and other conduct inconsistent with this policy aspiration. This paper therefore examined character development and responsible citizenship among university students in Nigeria, with particular attention to the role of higher education in shaping these outcomes. It addressed three specific objectives: to examine the role of higher education in fostering character development among university students in Nigeria; to assess the role of higher education in promoting responsible citizenship among university students in Nigeria; and to identify the challenges confronting higher education institutions in fostering character development and responsible citizenship among university students. The paper adopted a literature-based methodology, drawing on peer-reviewed sources. Anchored on Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development and Bandura's Social Learning Theory, the paper interrogated the reviewed authors' views, showing that Nigerian universities possess considerable formal capacity, through General Studies and Citizenship Education courses, to shape character and citizenship, but that this capacity is substantially undermined by cultism, peer influence, weak institutional sanctioning and inconsistent staff conduct. The paper concluded that higher education's contribution to character and citizenship formation in Nigeria depends less on curriculum design than on the disciplinary and social environment surrounding students, and it therefore recommended specific institutional and pedagogical reforms.
Keywords	Character Development, Responsible Citizenship, Higher Education, University Students, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Universities occupy a distinctive position in the life of any nation, standing simultaneously as sites of intellectual formation and as environments in which young adults consolidate the values and civic dispositions they will carry into public life. This dual function, intellectual and moral, is nowhere more explicitly acknowledged than in Nigeria's own educational policy architecture, which identifies the production of "responsible, skilled and self-reliant citizens" as one of the central goals of tertiary

education. Higher education, on this understanding, is expected to do more than confer degrees; it is expected to complete the process of character formation begun in the home and in earlier stages of schooling, and to prepare graduates for the exercise of responsible citizenship within a plural and often fragile federation.

The stakes attached to this expectation are considerable. University students in Nigeria typically enter tertiary institutions between the ages of seventeen and twenty, a developmental period during which identity, moral reasoning and civic orientation remain highly responsive to environmental influence. What students observe and experience on campus, whether the conduct of lecturers and administrators, the behaviour of peers, or the visible consequences of misconduct, plausibly shapes their subsequent conduct as graduates, professionals and citizens considerably more than any single course in Citizenship Education or General Studies can, by itself, determine. Nigerian universities therefore function not merely as instructional institutions but as socialising environments whose disciplinary climate and institutional culture carry independent weight in the character and citizenship outcomes their graduates ultimately display.

Set against this expectation, however, the reality of campus life in Nigeria presents a considerably less encouraging picture. Cultism, examination malpractice, sexual harassment, extortion of junior students, and tolerance of corrupt or unethical conduct continue to be documented across Nigerian tertiary institutions, including at some of the country's oldest and most reputable universities. Fadipe et al. (2026) report that cult-related clashes on Nigerian campuses produced more than 26,789 deaths between 2008 and 2023, with 581 recorded in 2024 alone, a scale of violence that sits uneasily alongside the university's stated mission of producing responsible citizens. Complementing this evidence, Owan et al. (2024) find that undergraduates at a Nigerian federal university hold measurably varied, and in important respects tolerant, perceptions of corruption depending on demographic characteristics such as gender, religion and academic level, suggesting that attitudes toward integrity are neither uniform nor automatically instilled by university attendance alone.

This paper focused on the relationship between higher education and the twin outcomes of character development and responsible citizenship among Nigerian university students. It proceeds from the general observation that universities are widely expected to serve as engines of character and civic formation, through Nigeria's specific and well-documented experience of campus disorder and value inconsistency, to a focused examination of what recent evidence actually shows about higher education's contribution to these outcomes, and what continues to constrain that contribution.

2. Statement of the Problem

Nigerian federal policy on education explicitly commits tertiary institutions to producing graduates equipped with sound moral character and a disposition toward responsible citizenship, a commitment operationalised through compulsory General Studies courses, including Citizenship Education, Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution, and Nigerian Peoples and Culture, taught to all undergraduates irrespective of discipline (Okotie & Agir, 2024). In principle, this arrangement should ensure that every Nigerian graduate, regardless of field of study, receives structured exposure to the civic and ethical content required to function as a responsible citizen. In practice, the persistence and, in several respects, worsening character of campus misconduct in Nigeria raises serious doubt about whether this policy commitment is being realised.

Cultism supplies the most visible and best documented illustration of this problem. Originally founded at the University College, Ibadan in 1952 as a fraternity intended to cultivate leadership and challenge colonial convention, campus cultism in Nigeria has, over subsequent decades, evolved into a network of violent confraternities responsible for widespread intimidation, extortion, sexual violence and killing (Fadipe et al., 2026). Fadipe et al.'s (2026) survey of 216 students at The Polytechnic, Ibadan found that negative peer influence, inadequate guidance and counselling provision, and negative media influence were the three most significant reported causes of cult involvement, while untimely death, life imprisonment and character assassination were identified as the three most severe consequences. Nwosu (2024), examining universities in Rivers State, similarly documents measurable social correlates of students' proneness to cultism, reinforcing the conclusion that cult involvement is not an isolated aberration confined to a small number of institutions but a recurring, socially patterned feature of Nigerian campus life.

A second concerns the inconsistency of student attitudes toward corruption and integrity. Owan et al. (2024), surveying undergraduates at a Nigerian federal university, find that perceptions of corruption vary significantly by gender, religious affiliation, and level of study, with some demographic groups displaying markedly greater tolerance of corrupt practices than others. This finding is instructive because it indicates that exposure to a university environment, and even to formal General Studies content addressing civic values, does not automatically produce a uniform or robust rejection of corruption among students, raising the question of what factors, beyond curriculum content, account for this variation.

Another problem is found in the recurring tension between student unionism, intended as a vehicle for responsible civic participation and leadership development, and its frequent entanglement with cult-related violence and political manipulation on Nigerian campuses. Campus elections in many Nigerian universities have, at various points, been marred by violence, ballot manipulation and the deployment of cult groups to intimidate rival candidates, a pattern that represents a direct inversion of student unionism's intended civic purpose: rather than cultivating the habits of democratic participation and responsible leadership that student government is meant to model, campus politics in several documented instances has instead modelled precisely the electoral malpractice that Nigeria's civic education curriculum explicitly seeks to discourage.

These illustrations converge on a single underlying problem: notwithstanding a clearly articulated policy commitment to character and citizenship formation, and notwithstanding the existence of compulsory curricular content directed at this goal, Nigerian universities continue to produce graduates whose character and civic conduct, at least during their time as students, frequently diverge sharply from the policy aspiration. This paper investigates whether this divergence reflects a fundamental limitation in higher education's capacity to shape character and citizenship, or whether it instead reflects specific, identifiable institutional and environmental failures that undermine an otherwise sound policy design.

3. Aim and Specific Objectives of the Paper

The aim of this paper was to examine character development and responsible citizenship among university students in Nigeria, with particular reference to the role of higher education. In furtherance of this aim, the paper addreesed the following specific objectives:

i. to examine the role of higher education in fostering character development among university students in Nigeria;

ii. to assess the role of higher education in promoting responsible citizenship among university students in Nigeria; and

iii. to identify the challenges confronting higher education institutions in fostering character development and responsible citizenship among university students in Nigeria.

4. Conceptual Clarifications

4.1 Character Development

Character development refers to the progressive cultivation, over time, of the ethical dispositions, virtues and habits of conduct that dispose an individual toward morally sound behaviour across the various domains of life (Pathmu et al., 2025). At the university level, character development is understood to build upon, rather than originate, the moral formation begun in the family and in earlier schooling, extending and consolidating a student's ethical dispositions through exposure to new social environments, greater personal autonomy, and, in the Nigerian context, structured curricular content such as Citizenship Education and General Studies (Uya, 2025).

4.2 Responsible Citizenship

Responsible citizenship refers to the disposition and practical capacity of an individual to exercise their rights and discharge their obligations as a member of a political community in a manner consistent with the common good, encompassing civic participation, respect for law and constituted authority, tolerance of diversity, and active contribution to community and national development (Kelechi & Ridwan, 2025). Within Nigerian higher education, responsible citizenship is typically understood as the intended outcome of General Studies and Citizenship Education courses, which seek to cultivate national consciousness, civic competence and social responsibility among graduates irrespective of their field of specialisation (Okotie & Agir, 2024).

4.3 Higher Education

Higher education, for the purpose of this paper, refers to post-secondary education delivered through universities, polytechnics and colleges of education, encompassing both the formal instructional curriculum and the broader institutional environment, including student affairs administration, disciplinary systems, staff conduct and campus culture, within which students undergo character and civic formation during their period of study (Nwachukwu, 2024).

5. Literature Review

5.1 The Role of Higher Education in Fostering Character Development Among University Students

Authors writing on this subject generally credit higher education with meaningful, if incompletely realised, capacity to shape student character. For instance, Uya (2025) examines the Nigerian curriculum's potential to function as a vehicle for cultivating ethical behaviour and civic consciousness, arguing that subjects such as Civic Education, Social Studies, Religious Studies and Security Education, though most fully developed at the basic and secondary levels, are extended into tertiary education through General Studies requirements that expose every undergraduate, regardless

of discipline, to value-laden content addressing integrity, tolerance and respect for constituted authority. Uya's (2025) analysis, however, concludes that this potential remains substantially unrealised, since the delivery of such content is frequently treated as a bureaucratic formality rather than a serious pedagogical undertaking, with large lecture sizes, minimal continuous assessment, and limited opportunity for the kind of sustained ethical reasoning that character formation requires.

Kelechi and Ridwan (2025) advance a related argument, situating character education within Nigeria's stated national policy objectives while documenting its practical marginalisation relative to examinable, discipline-specific content. Although their analysis addresses the Nigerian education system broadly rather than higher education specifically, its finding that character-focused content is treated as peripheral rather than central applies with particular force at the university level, where General Studies courses are frequently regarded by both students and, in some instances, institutions themselves as a compulsory inconvenience rather than a core component of the undergraduate experience.

Okotie and Agir (2024) examine Nigeria's National Policy on Education as it applies to tertiary institutions, arguing that the Core Curriculum Minimum Academic Standard governing Nigerian universities has largely repeated the essentials of earlier curriculum documents without adequately addressing the need to inculcate the logical and critical reasoning capacities upon which genuine ethical judgement, as opposed to rote compliance with stated rules, ultimately depends. This finding bears directly on character development, since Kohlberg's tradition of moral development research, discussed further below, holds that mature moral reasoning requires exactly the kind of critical, reflective capacity that Okotie and Agir (2024) find inadequately cultivated within Nigeria's current tertiary curriculum framework.

Pathmu et al.'s (2025) meta-analysis of thirty-eight international studies provides the most methodologically rigorous evidence available on character formation's responsiveness to structured educational intervention, finding that moral education programmes grounded in developmental theory, when properly implemented, produce measurable improvements in moral reasoning, identity and prosocial conduct among learners, including those at the tertiary level. This finding establishes that character development is genuinely responsive to well-designed higher education intervention, lending credibility to the Nigerian aspiration that university attendance should shape character, even as the specific Nigerian evidence reviewed above suggests that this aspiration has not yet been fully matched by implementation.

A further consideration concerns the informal, rather than curricular, dimension of character formation in Nigerian universities. Eyina and Anyalebechi (2026), although focused on national development broadly rather than universities specifically, find that educational institutions retain substantial moral influence over the individuals who pass through them, but that this influence is frequently rendered inconsistent by poor role-modelling on the part of the very staff and administrators responsible for character formation. Applied to the university context, this finding suggests that a lecturer who solicits bribes for grades, or an administrator who tolerates cult activity in exchange for political support, communicates a more powerful and durable lesson about acceptable conduct than any formally assigned reading in a Citizenship Education course, a dynamic that recurs throughout the literature reviewed under this paper's third objective.

5.2 The Role of Higher Education in Promoting Responsible Citizenship Among University Students

A parallel body of literature addresses higher education's specific contribution to responsible citizenship, understood as encompassing civic participation, tolerance and respect for law, as distinct from character formation more broadly conceived. Okotie and Agir (2024) situate Nigeria's General Studies framework as the principal institutional mechanism through which citizenship formation is pursued at the tertiary level, noting that courses such as Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution and Nigerian Peoples and Culture are explicitly designed to cultivate national consciousness and civic competence among students drawn from Nigeria's diverse ethnic, religious and regional backgrounds. Their analysis finds that these courses possess clear conceptual alignment with Nigeria's national integration objectives but that their practical delivery, like that of character-focused General Studies content more broadly, has been constrained by outdated curriculum documents that have not been substantially revised to reflect contemporary civic challenges.

Owan et al. (2024) provide direct empirical evidence bearing on the citizenship outcomes higher education is meant to cultivate, examining undergraduate perceptions of corruption at a Nigerian federal university. Their finding that corruption perceptions vary significantly according to demographic characteristics, including gender, religious affiliation and level of study, indicates that the university environment does not produce a uniform civic orientation among students exposed to ostensibly the same institutional and curricular environment. This variation is significant for the second objective of this paper because it suggests that responsible citizenship, as an outcome, is shaped by factors operating alongside, and potentially independently of, formal Citizenship Education content, including prior socialisation, peer group affiliation, and the specific disciplinary or faculty culture within which a student is embedded.

According to Okotie and Agir (2024), student unionism constitutes a further mechanism through which higher education is expected to cultivate responsible citizenship, offering students structured opportunity to practise democratic participation, leadership and advocacy within a bounded institutional setting before assuming these roles in national public life. Where student union elections and governance operate transparently and inclusively, this mechanism functions broadly as intended, providing a genuine, if small-scale, training ground for civic leadership. Where student politics becomes entangled with cult-related intimidation or ballot manipulation, however, as documented in accounts of campus electoral violence reviewed under the statement of the problem above, the same mechanism instead models precisely the electoral malpractice that Citizenship Education curricula are designed to discourage, illustrating how a single institutional mechanism can function either as a vehicle for, or an obstacle to, responsible citizenship formation depending on the integrity of its actual operation.

Nwachukwu (2024) situates citizenship-relevant competencies, including civic responsibility and social adaptability, as components of the broader human capital that higher education is expected to develop in Nigerian graduates, linking responsible citizenship not only to individual ethical conduct but to the collective productive and institutional capacity of the nation. This framing usefully connects the second objective of this paper to its broader developmental stakes, situating responsible citizenship among university graduates as a matter of direct relevance to Nigeria's institutional and

economic development, rather than as a narrowly moral or civic concern detached from material national outcomes.

5.3 Challenges Confronting Higher Education in Fostering Character Development and Responsible Citizenship

The literature reviewed under the first two objectives converges, with considerable consistency, on a set of challenges that recur across the third objective's focus. Fadipe et al. (2026) identify negative peer influence as the single most significant reported cause of cult involvement among the students they surveyed, ranking above inadequate guidance and counselling provision and negative media influence, both of which were themselves rated as substantial contributing factors. This finding indicates that the peer environment within Nigerian universities functions, for a meaningful proportion of students, as a more powerful socialising force than either formal instruction or institutional counselling services, a challenge that curricular reform alone is unlikely to resolve.

Nwosu (2024) extends this analysis by identifying specific social variables correlated with cultism proneness among university students in Rivers State, providing further empirical grounding for the proposition that cult involvement follows identifiable, socially patterned pathways rather than occurring at random across the student population. Fayokun (2025), examining the historical development of campus cultism across Nigerian higher education more broadly, traces its evolution from an originally disciplined fraternal movement into a network of violent confraternities implicated in extortion, sexual violence and killing, and argues that the persistence of cultism, notwithstanding decades of institutional and governmental intervention, reflects deep structural weaknesses in campus security, disciplinary enforcement, and the broader socio-economic conditions that render cult membership attractive to vulnerable students.

Institutional inconsistency in the sanctioning of misconduct constitutes a further recurring challenge. Eyina and Anyalebechi's (2026) finding that Nigerian institutions, including educational ones, are undermined by "selective sanctioning" applies directly to the university context, where students frequently observe that politically connected or financially advantaged offenders escape the disciplinary consequences that would ordinarily attach to cult involvement, examination malpractice, or other serious misconduct. Where students perceive that institutional rules are enforced selectively rather than consistently, the deterrent and educative function that disciplinary systems are meant to serve is substantially weakened, regardless of how comprehensively those rules are stated in university regulations.

A further challenge concerns resource and infrastructural constraints that limit universities' capacity to provide the guidance, counselling and mentorship services identified by Fadipe et al. (2026) as protective against cult involvement. Nwachukwu (2024) documents broader infrastructural and capacity deficits within Nigeria's education sector that directly bear on this challenge, noting that inadequate funding constrains the provision of student support services, including the guidance and counselling personnel whose scarcity Fadipe et al. (2026) identify as a significant contributing cause of cult involvement.

Okotie and Agir (2024) add a curricular dimension to this challenge, arguing that Nigeria's tertiary General Studies curriculum documents have not been substantially revised to address contemporary civic and ethical challenges, leaving universities to attempt character and citizenship formation using

instructional content that has not kept pace with the specific pressures, including social media influence and heightened economic precarity, that contemporary Nigerian students actually face.

6. Empirical Review

Fadipe et al. (2026) examined the causes and social consequences of cultism among students of The Polytechnic, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. The study was anchored on issues relating to students' social and character development and adopted a descriptive survey design. Data were obtained from 216 students using a validated questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics. The study found that negative peer influence (M = 3.94), inadequate guidance and counselling services (M = 3.92), and negative media influence (M = 3.90) were the leading factors associated with cult involvement. Untimely death (M = 3.89), life imprisonment (M = 3.87), and character assassination (M = 3.84) were identified as major consequences. The authors concluded that social and institutional factors significantly influence students' behavioural choices. The study is relevant because it demonstrates how the university environment, peer relationships and institutional support can influence character development. However, its focus on cultism limits its coverage of responsible citizenship as a broader concept. The present paper extended the discussion by examining character development in relation to responsible citizenship among university students.

Nwosu (2024) investigated factors associated with cultism proneness among university students in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study adopted a survey design and examined social factors associated with students' susceptibility to cult-related activities. Data were collected from university students and analysed statistically to establish relationships among the variables examined. The findings identified social and peer-related influences as important factors associated with students' proneness to cultism. The study concluded that students' behavioural development is influenced by their immediate social environment. The study is useful to the present research because it provides evidence that responsible conduct among university students cannot be understood solely from formal educational content. However, its emphasis on cultism proneness leaves a gap concerning the wider dimensions of character development and responsible citizenship, which the present paper addressed.

Owan et al. (2024) examined undergraduate students' perceptions of corruption at a Nigerian federal university. The study adopted a survey research design and obtained data from undergraduate students through a structured questionnaire. The data were analysed using appropriate statistical procedures, with particular attention to demographic differences in students' perceptions of corruption. The findings revealed statistically significant variations in corruption perceptions according to gender, religious affiliation and level of study. The authors concluded that students do not possess a uniform orientation towards corruption and that demographic and social factors may influence their civic attitudes. The study provides useful evidence for understanding responsible citizenship because attitudes towards corruption constitute an important dimension of civic behaviour. However, the study concentrated on corruption perceptions rather than the broader process of character development and responsible citizenship. The present study addresses this gap by examining character formation and its implications for responsible citizenship among university students.

Fadipe et al. (2026), drawing on evidence reported by Ogunleke (2025), further highlighted the serious consequences associated with cult-related activities in Nigerian tertiary institutions, including reported cult-related deaths between 2008 and 2023. This evidence reinforces the argument that weaknesses in character formation and responsible conduct can have consequences extending beyond

individual students to institutional and wider societal wellbeing. However, the evidence is primarily concerned with cult-related outcomes rather than the broader educational processes through which character and responsible citizenship can be developed. The present paper therefore shifted attention from particular manifestations of student misconduct to the wider role of character development in cultivating responsible citizens within Nigerian universities.

7. Theoretical Framework

This paper was anchored on Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development and Bandura's Social Learning Theory**.** The two theories provide complementary explanations of character development and responsible citizenship among university students as follows:

7.1 Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development was propounded by Lawrence Kohlberg in 1958 and subsequently developed through his later work on moral reasoning. The theory assumes that moral reasoning develops progressively through identifiable stages grouped into three broad levels: pre-conventional morality, conventional morality and post-conventional morality. At the pre-conventional level, behaviour is largely guided by punishment avoidance and personal interest; at the conventional level, individuals are influenced by social expectations, rules and the desire to maintain social approval; while post-conventional reasoning involves the consideration of broader ethical principles and values that may extend beyond established rules.

A major strength of Kohlberg's theory is its explanation of moral development as a process rather than a fixed personal attribute. It is particularly relevant to university students because higher education can expose young adults to diverse ideas, ethical questions, competing values and situations requiring independent judgement. Such experiences can provide opportunities for students to reconsider previously acquired beliefs and develop more mature approaches to moral decision-making. The theory also provides a useful basis for understanding why character education should involve critical reflection and moral reasoning rather than merely instructing students to obey rules.

However, the theory has limitations. Moral reasoning does not necessarily translate into moral behaviour, since individuals may understand what is ethically appropriate but still act contrary to that understanding. The theory has also been criticised for placing considerable emphasis on justice-oriented reasoning while giving comparatively less attention to other moral considerations, such as care and relationships. These limitations are important in the Nigerian university context, where students' conduct may be influenced not only by their moral reasoning but also by peers, institutional practices, family background and prevailing social norms.

The theory is directly applicable to the first objective of this study, which concerns character development among university students. It suggests that university education can contribute to character development when students are exposed to sustained opportunities for ethical reflection, discussion of moral dilemmas and critical examination of social responsibilities. Thus, the effectiveness of character education should not be assessed merely by the existence of a course or curriculum but by whether students are encouraged to reason about honesty, responsibility, justice, respect, accountability and other values relevant to citizenship. The theory consequently supports the argument that higher education has an important role in developing students' capacity for independent moral judgement.

7.2 Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura developed Social Learning Theory in 1977, building on the proposition that human behaviour is acquired partly through observing and imitating the behaviour of others. The theory assumes that individuals learn from models within their social environment and that observed behaviour is more likely to be reproduced when the model is regarded as credible, influential or successful and when the behaviour appears to receive rewards rather than sanctions. Learning therefore occurs not only through direct experience but also through observation, imitation and the consequences observed in others.

The major strength of Bandura's theory is its ability to explain the influence of the social environment on behaviour. It is particularly relevant to university students because students interact continuously with peers, lecturers, university administrators, family members and other social groups. These actors provide behavioural models that may reinforce either responsible or irresponsible conduct. The theory therefore moves the analysis beyond what students are formally taught to consider what they actually observe within their everyday institutional environment.

Its major limitation is that observation does not automatically result in imitation. Individuals possess the capacity to evaluate observed behaviour, and personal values, self-regulation and previous experiences can influence whether a behaviour is adopted. The theory may also give insufficient attention to the cognitive development of moral principles when used alone. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish its usefulness when combined with Kohlberg's theory.

Bandura's theory is particularly applicable to the second and third objectives of the study because responsible citizenship is expressed through observable conduct. The empirical evidence reviewed in this study demonstrates the importance of peer influence, institutional practices and social environments in shaping students' conduct. Fadipe et al. (2026), for example, identified negative peer influence as the most prominent factor associated with cult involvement among the students studied. From a social learning perspective, such behaviour may be acquired where students observe influential peers engaging in undesirable conduct and perceive social benefits such as status, protection, acceptance or belonging. Conversely, where students consistently observe lecturers, administrators and peers demonstrating honesty, respect, accountability and civic responsibility, such conduct can provide positive models for imitation.

The theory also helps explain why formal character education may have limited effects where the behaviour observed within the university contradicts the values communicated through the curriculum. A student who is taught that bribery, examination malpractice or violence is unacceptable but repeatedly observes such conduct being tolerated or rewarded may receive conflicting behavioural messages. In this circumstance, the social environment can reinforce behaviour that contradicts formal instruction.

Theoretical Relevance to the Paper

Kohlberg's and Bandura's theories are complementary rather than competing explanations of character development and responsible citizenship. Kohlberg provides an explanation of how students develop the capacity to reason about moral issues, whereas Bandura explains how the social environment influences the behaviours through which those values are expressed. The distinction is important because responsible citizenship requires more than knowing what is morally appropriate; it also requires translating values into conduct.

Taken together, the theories suggest that effective character development in Nigerian universities requires both moral reasoning and positive social modelling. A university may provide students with opportunities to discuss ethics, citizenship and social responsibility, but the effect of such instruction can be weakened where students encounter contradictory behaviour among peers or institutional actors. Conversely, positive role models may encourage responsible conduct, but sustained character development also requires students to understand and critically evaluate the moral principles underlying their actions.

The combined framework therefore provides a strong theoretical basis for this study. Kohlberg explains the developmental and cognitive basis of character formation, while Bandura accounts for the peer, institutional and environmental influences through which responsible or irresponsible behaviour may be acquired. The framework consequently supports the position that character development and responsible citizenship among university students depend on the interaction between what students are taught, how they reason about moral issues, and what they observe and experience within their social environment**.**

8. Methodology

This paper adopted theoretical and literature-based methodology relying entirely on secondary sources, drawing principally on peer-reviewed journal articles addressing character development, moral development theory, citizenship education, cultism and student conduct within Nigerian higher education. Sources were identified through a targeted search of recent literature addressing these themes, with particular attention paid to studies employing empirical research designs, whether survey-based, correlational or meta-analytic, in order to ground the paper's analysis in current and verifiable evidence rather than unsubstantiated assertion.

The material gathered was organised thematically around the paper's three specific objectives and examined in relation to the two theories comprising its theoretical framework. As a desk-based, literature-oriented enquiry, this paper does not generate new primary data; its contribution consists in the systematic synthesis and critical interrogation of existing evidence bearing on character development and responsible citizenship among Nigerian university students.

9. Discussions

9.1 The Role of Higher Education in Fostering Character Development

The paper revealed a pattern in which Nigerian authors correctly identify higher education's formal capacity to shape character while under-examining why that capacity so often fails to translate into practice. Uya (2025) credits the Nigerian curriculum with meaningful potential to cultivate ethical behaviour, yet the same analysis concedes that this potential is undermined by examination-oriented delivery, a concession that, on closer reading, says considerably more about the limits of curriculum design than about its promise. A concrete illustration sharpens this point: a General Studies course such as Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution, taught to lecture halls of several hundred students with a single end-of-semester multiple-choice examination, cannot plausibly generate the sustained ethical reasoning that character development requires, regardless of how carefully its syllabus is written. Okotie and Agir's (2024) finding that Nigeria's Core Curriculum Minimum Academic Standard has largely reproduced earlier curriculum documents without adequately building in the logical and critical reasoning capacity needed for mature ethical judgement reinforces this reading: the problem identified is not that Nigerian universities lack character-relevant content, but that the

pedagogical form in which this content is delivered is poorly matched to the cognitive requirements of genuine moral development.

Pathmu et al.'s (2025) meta-analytic finding that structured, theory-grounded moral education produces measurable gains in moral reasoning is, on interrogation, best read as a conditional rather than a general claim: it demonstrates what character education can achieve when properly structured, not what Nigerian General Studies delivery, as currently practised, is achieving. Eyina and Anyalebechi's (2026) finding regarding inconsistent staff role-modelling supplies the missing piece: even a well-designed course loses its formative force where a student's lived experience of the university, a lecturer who trades grades for bribes, an administrator who overlooks cult activity, contradicts its content. A concrete illustration is instructive here: a student who completes a Citizenship Education module condemning bribery, only to observe a departmental official demanding payment to expedite an academic transcript, receives two contradictory lessons simultaneously, and the lesson delivered through direct personal consequence is, on Kohlberg's own account of how moral reasoning is tested and consolidated, likely to prove the more durable of the two.

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development supports this paper's finding by specifying precisely what sustained moral development requires: repeated engagement with morally complex situations appropriate to a learner's developmental stage. University students, situated at a stage where post-conventional reasoning remains attainable, represent an audience for whom character development remains genuinely possible; the theory's own logic, however, indicates that a single compulsory course delivered once in an undergraduate's first year cannot supply the sustained engagement the theory specifies. The theoretical framework therefore does not merely echo this paper's finding that Nigerian higher education's contribution to character development is real but limited; it explains, with some precision, why the limitation exists and where the deficiency lies.

9.2 The Role of Higher Education in Promoting Responsible Citizenship

The paper’s findings similarly show authors converging on a plausible institutional design while withholding some of the more searching, follow-up questions the same design raises. Okotie and Agir (2024) situate General Studies as the principal vehicle for citizenship formation in Nigerian universities, an institutional design broadly sound in conception, since it ensures every graduate, irrespective of discipline, receives structured exposure to civic content. Owan et al.'s (2024) empirical finding, that corruption perceptions among undergraduates at a Nigerian federal university vary significantly by gender, religion and level of study, is the more consequential result for this discussion, because it demonstrates that exposure to this common institutional design does not produce a common civic outcome. If university attendance itself were sufficient to instil a uniform disposition toward integrity, one would not expect the demographic variation Owan et al. (2024) document; its presence indicates that responsible citizenship, as an actual student disposition rather than a stated curricular goal, is shaped by factors that predate and operate alongside university enrolment, including family background, religious formation and prior schooling, rather than being newly created by General Studies content alone.

Nigeria's student unionism illustrates this same tension in a more concrete form. Where campus elections proceed transparently, student government functions as a genuine, if modest, training ground for democratic participation, giving substance to the citizenship outcomes General Studies content

addresses only in the abstract. Where the same elections are marred by cult-related intimidation or ballot manipulation, a documented recurring pattern across Nigerian campuses, student politics instead becomes a live demonstration of the very electoral malpractice Citizenship Education is designed to discourage. This paper's discussion treats this contrast as evidence that the practical, experiential dimension of campus life carries at least as much civic-formative weight as the formal curriculum Okotie and Agir (2024) examine, a conclusion the curriculum-centred literature under review tends to state in passing rather than to interrogate directly.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory accounts for this pattern more directly than a curriculum-focused account can. On Bandura's model, students do not acquire civic disposition solely, or even primarily, from assigned reading; they acquire it substantially by observing which conduct, among the models available to them, peers, student leaders, lecturers and administrators, appears to be rewarded and which appears to be sanctioned. Where a corrupt student leader retains office, or where examination malpractice goes unpunished because of political connection, the observational lesson communicated to the wider student body is that integrity is negotiable, a lesson that no amount of well-designed Citizenship Education content can fully counteract if it is not corroborated by consistent institutional example. Nwachukwu's (2024) framing of civic responsibility as a component of national human capital gives this dynamic its wider significance: a citizenry whose civic disposition has been shaped, in practice, by inconsistent institutional modelling rather than by the values its formal curriculum states, carries that inconsistency into public and professional life after graduation, with consequences extending well beyond the university gates.

9.3 Challenges Confronting Higher Education in This Domain

The challenges identified across the literature converge on a single explanatory thread rather than constituting a list of unconnected difficulties. Fadipe et al.'s (2026) finding that negative peer influence outranks every other reported cause of cult involvement, including inadequate counselling and negative media exposure, is the empirical anchor for this paper's central interrogation of the literature: authors who frame character and citizenship formation primarily as a matter of curriculum design are, on this evidence, addressing a secondary rather than the primary determinant of student conduct. Nwosu's (2024) corroborating findings from a distinct set of universities in Rivers State indicate that this is not an artefact specific to one institution or survey instrument but a broader, socially patterned feature of Nigerian campus life.

A concrete illustration drawn from Fayokun's (2025) historical account of cultism's evolution makes the point vividly: the Pyrates Confraternity, founded in 1952 with the explicit aim of cultivating leadership and challenging colonial convention, has, over seven decades, splintered into dozens of rival confraternities implicated in extortion, sexual violence and killing. This trajectory did not occur because Nigerian universities lacked a stated commitment to character and citizenship formation; it occurred because the social dynamics Bandura's theory identifies, status conferred by group membership, protection offered in exchange for loyalty, and inconsistent institutional sanctioning, proved more behaviourally powerful over successive student cohorts than the university's formal disciplinary and curricular apparatus. Eyina and Anyalebechi's (2026) finding regarding selective institutional sanctioning supplies the mechanism by which this social dynamic persists across decades rather than being extinguished by early intervention: where students observe that well-connected

offenders escape serious consequence, the deterrent value of university disciplinary codes is undermined regardless of how comprehensively those codes are written.

Kohlberg's theory indicates that character development requires sustained cognitive engagement that current curricular delivery does not provide; Bandura's theory indicates that, in the absence of such engagement, students will instead acquire conduct from the more immediate and consequential models available to them on campus, whether peers, student leaders, or staff. Where those models exhibit cultism, corruption tolerance or inconsistent sanctioning, as the evidence reviewed in this paper documents, no curricular reform confined to content revision is likely to produce the character and citizenship outcomes Nigerian policy documents continue to state as their aspiration.

10. Conclusion

This paper examined character development and responsible citizenship among university students in Nigeria, with particular attention to the role higher education plays in shaping these outcomes. The evidence and argument reviewed indicate that Nigerian universities possess genuine, theoretically grounded capacity to advance character development and responsible citizenship, situated as they are at a developmental stage during which students remain responsive to structured ethical and civic engagement. This capacity, however, remains substantially unrealised in current practice, constrained by examination-oriented delivery of General Studies content, outdated curriculum documents, and, most consequentially, a campus social environment in which cultism, peer pressure, and inconsistent institutional sanctioning exert a more immediate and powerful influence on student conduct than formal instruction alone can counteract.

These findings indicate that the persistent gap between Nigeria's stated higher education policy aspirations and the continuing reality of campus misconduct reflects a mismatch between curricular design and the actual mechanisms of moral and civic development, rather than a fundamental absence of institutional commitment to character and citizenship formation. Addressing this gap accordingly requires attention not only to what Nigerian universities teach but to what students observe, experience and are permitted to get away with during their years of study.

11. Recommendations

Arising from the foregoing discussion and conclusion, the paper makes the following recommendations:

1. **Universities should strengthen and modernise character and citizenship education:** General Studies courses such as Citizenship Education and Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution should move beyond large-class, examination-oriented delivery towards sustained, discussion-based learning involving case studies, ethical dilemmas, practical civic activities and continuous assessment. The curriculum should also be periodically reviewed by the National Universities Commission to address contemporary challenges confronting students, including social media influence, economic pressures, cultism and other emerging threats to responsible citizenship. This approach would provide students with sustained opportunities for moral reflection and ethical reasoning, consistent with Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development.
2. **Universities should strengthen student support systems and create an institutional environment that models responsible conduct:** Guidance and counselling services should

be adequately staffed, accessible and confidential, with particular attention to early identification and support for students vulnerable to harmful peer influence and cult recruitment. At the same time, universities should establish clear ethical standards for lecturers and administrators and ensure that staff conduct reflects the values taught to students. Student union governance should also be protected from intimidation and manipulation through transparent electoral procedures and appropriate security arrangements, allowing student politics to serve as a practical avenue for developing responsible civic leadership.

3. **Universities should establish consistent, transparent and non-selective enforcement of institutional rules:** Disciplinary codes relating to cultism, examination malpractice, corruption, violence and staff misconduct should be applied fairly and consistently, irrespective of the social, political or institutional status of those involved. Disciplinary procedures should be transparent, properly documented and subject to appropriate oversight to strengthen students' confidence in institutional justice. Consistent enforcement would also provide credible behavioural consequences for misconduct, while demonstrating through institutional practice the values of accountability, integrity and responsible citizenship that students are expected to acquire.

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