



A Student-Centred Understanding of What Influences Character Development in Higher Education

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Character Caught, Taught, and Sought: Theories and Evidence

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Short Abstract

There remains limited empirical evidence examining the typology of character ‘caught’, ‘taught’ and ‘sought’ in practice—particularly in higher education. Several universities in the Netherlands articulate their (desired) role in fostering character alongside knowledge and skills, thus research must investigate whether these goals are met. It is especially important to assess how students actually experience their own character development. Therefore, we ask: ‘What factors do students recognise to be influential in their IPC character learning gain during their undergraduate studies?’

Introduction

A holistic approach to student development has been receiving much scholarly attention recently. Personal growth, well-being, and flourishing are just a few areas that are being emphasised besides knowledge and skills in undergraduate development (Bai et al., 2022; Song, 2024). Flourishing is ‘the relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good, including the contexts in which that person lives’ (p. 636), and its components include health, happiness, meaning, relationships, character and financial security (VanderWeele et al., 2025). According to a global study, the lowest flourishing was reported for 18–24-year-olds (VanderWeele et al., 2025), the same age as when people usually attend university. This period is a critical stage because many students face stress such as academic pressure, social challenges, or career planning (Chye et al., 2024; Tian & Tang, 2025).

The areas of growth, well-being, and flourishing are connected to the field of character education, that concerns itself with ‘explicit and implicit educational activities’ (p. 6) directed at virtue development (*The Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues*, 2022). Virtues (also called values, Gamage et al., 2021, or qualities) are morally good dispositions (Lamb et al., 2022) and they constitute character, by reliably shaping thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (Lamb et al., 2022).

The inclusion of concepts such as flourishing and growth into educational goals is important for multiple reasons. First, educators want students to reach their potential and live a fulfilling life (Orona et al., 2024). Second, although many experts would argue that the task of the university is to teach only knowledge and skills (Fish, 2012), and there is a tendency to evaluate learning outcomes quantitatively based on cognitive measures (Rogaten et al., 2019), there is a positive relationship between character qualities and educational variables, such as academic performance, perseverance, academic success, GPA, study time, study satisfaction, and career adaptability (Gamage et al., 2021; García-Álvarez et al., 2024). Lamb and colleagues (2022) argue that students should not only learn skills but also how to use these skills for good. The disadvantage of ignoring character education in academic education is that it tends to corrupt study program attainments. Students may focus solely on output and rewards to improve their CV in self-interest instead of striving to serve a higher purpose and seek self-realisation through service to the world (Brooks, 2015). Third, employers want graduates with unique soft skills (Orona et al., 2024). Gamage and colleagues (2021) argue that academic development without character development can cause struggle for individuals in their later professional and social life: graduate students would lack qualities such as adaptability, willingness to learn, caring for and helping others, friendliness, confidence, and courage. Fourth, character education is important for cultural transmission of values, imparting societal priorities and expectations to the next generation (Gamage et al., 2021). Finally, character qualities are crucial for well-being (García-Álvarez et al., 2024) and are related to flourishing (Orona et al., 2024). Studies have shown that character education

interventions can increase well-being (García-Álvarez et al., 2024; Orona et al., 2024; Tian & Tang, 2025), resilience (Cohen De Lara & Leesen, 2025), and a sense of belonging (Tian & Tang, 2025), which is a good reason to focus on this development at the tertiary educational level.

Given the emerging interest in these new areas of research, there is a need to investigate what educational factors make students flourish at university, but there is currently little conceptual agreement on how to capture these factors. By combining the concepts of character and learning gain, we can encompass this complex form of development. Learning gain is the change induced by educational activities over time (Baume, 2018; McGrath et al., 2015; Rogaten et al., 2019; Rogaten & Rienties, 2021; Tight, 2021; Vermunt et al., 2018), and thus character learning gain is the change in character that is understood as a result of formal learning experiences between at least two points in time. University training can transform students' identity and what they believe the purpose of university is (Ashwin et al., 2016). However, university students are often left without support in their moral development, since most character education programs are targeting primary and secondary school students (Lamb et al., 2022), although it is gaining popularity in higher education (Orona et al., 2024). In this article we focus on three areas of character learning gain rooted in the *neo-Aristotelian* tradition: intellectual, performance, and civic (IPC) virtue development (Baehr, 2017). Intellectual virtues are dispositions necessary for pursuing good thinking and epistemic ends (Orona et al., 2024), performance virtues enable the use of other virtues and help overcome challenges (*The Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues*, 2022), and civic virtues dispose people to act as responsible citizens who identify with social commitment (Leesen & Van Lenning, 2021).

Character learning gain has been researched by looking at interventions directed at different virtues in isolation (for a meta-analytic review see Brown et al., 2023), and some studies have investigated how virtue education affects behaviour (Orona et al., 2024), academic performance (García-Álvarez et al., 2024; Greenway et al., 2024), and well-being (Orona et al., 2024), but there is little known about what students believe enhances and hinders IPC character learning gain. Orona and colleagues (2024) argue that instruction, as well as interventions are effective in virtue development. However, the effectiveness of some of these have been questioned by Brown and colleagues (2023) whose meta-analysis shows that multiple of them fail to show a significant effect when compared with one another. Arthur (2024) states that institutional culture effects individual development, while Han and Rideout (2022) implore policymakers to leverage resources and design education to foster deep learning, the creation of community, and opportunities for the formation of individuals.

Despite these calls to action student perspectives remain largely absent from educational research. Students are important stakeholders in education (Haraldseid et al., 2015; Ilie et al., 2024), especially given the increased emphasis on student-centred learning, but their opinions are not often represented. Even when they are, existing research tends to focus on specific domains (e.g., students' understanding of what learning gain is, resilience, or views on the value of education), whereas a comprehensive qualitative approach that considers intellectual, performance, and civic virtues together has not, in the scope of the reviewed literature, been explored. To nuance our understanding of what enhances and hinders student character development it is imperative that student voices are included in research done on their development. What students have to say about the factors adds to the body of research outlined below and opens the discussion to not just what factors are important, but in what way they are important. Thus, the aim of this study is to discover students' perceptions and understanding of what helps them develop their intellectual, performance, and civic (IPC) character at university, and what factors students recognise and acknowledge as influential in their character development.

Theoretical background

Arthur (2024) argues that character development happens at university whether or not explicit efforts are made towards it. Therefore, it is more beneficial to be intentional and transparent about educational efforts directed at it. Faculty and staff, as well as policy makers should define what kind of student development they want to encourage at their institutions. Educational activities, as well as institutional culture should reflect these intentions in all areas of education including character. Within the institution, Eisner (2002) states that education has three dimensions: the official curriculum (planned activities, content, etc.) the hidden curriculum (e.g., values, environment, culture), and the null-curriculum (i.e., what is not taught or ignored). Moreover, there are intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence students' development, such as socioeconomic background, neighbourhood, religion (Gamage et al., 2021), as well as students characteristics (Han & Rideout, 2022). Various studies have identified factors that have a positive effect on student character development, although not all of them define it as such. The following studies have been collected based on the definitions of character, character education, and character learning gain above.

Institutionally, the broader educational environment (Arthur, 2024; Bai et al., 2022; Han & Rideout, 2022; Haraldseid et al., 2015; Song, 2024); learning communities created by the university (Gamage et al., 2021; Han & Rideout, 2022); the promotion of international education, exchange, and diverse learning environments (Han & Rideout, 2022); as well as campus facilities (Bai et al., 2022) play a positive role in character development. Moreover, teaching methods and structures, such as content (Bai et al., 2022; Lamb et al., 2022), and perceived content relevance and usefulness (Clement, 2016; Han & Rideout, 2022); feedback (Haraldseid et al., 2015; Song, 2024) and assessment (Ilie et al., 2024) support student development, and challenges and clear expectations (Haraldseid et al., 2015; Song, 2024); quality teaching (Bai et al., 2022); and extracurricular activities (Bai et al., 2022; Chye et al., 2024; Gamage et al., 2021; Han & Rideout, 2022; Ilie et al., 2024) have also been found to prompt growth. Furthermore, on the pedagogical level, learning processes and methods, like participation in active learning (Clement, 2016; Han & Rideout, 2022; Orona et al., 2024; Song, 2024); experiential learning or group work (Han & Rideout, 2022); training and practice (Ilie et al., 2024; Lamb et al., 2022; Orona et al., 2024); the presence of moral reminders, or dialogues increasing virtue literacy (Lamb et al., 2022) have been identified as factors in character development. Complementary student-centred practices such as emphasis on autonomy and choice (Ilie et al., 2024; Song, 2024); reflection and self-assessment (Han & Rideout, 2022; Lamb et al., 2022; Orona et al., 2024; Song, 2024); and the cultivation of self-management skills (Han & Rideout, 2022; Ilie et al., 2024; Song, 2024) also support learners.

On the interpersonal level, respect and caring from faculty (Chye et al., 2024; Han & Rideout, 2022; Ilie et al., 2024); modelling (Chye et al., 2024; Lamb et al., 2022; Orona et al., 2024; Song, 2024); intimate relationships, for example friendships (Bai et al., 2022; Chye et al., 2024; Han & Rideout, 2022; Haraldseid et al., 2015; Lamb et al., 2022); and collaboration and peer interaction (Ilie et al., 2024; Song, 2024) have been explored as factors in character development.

Some student characteristics that can positively influence character development are self-confidence (Han & Rideout, 2022) or student effort (Bai et al., 2022); and learning to prioritise health and well-being (Han & Rideout, 2022). Academic and mental health resources can be helpful in the latter (Han & Rideout, 2022) although Chye and colleagues (2024) found that students may be hesitant to use these.

A few studies also highlight what influences student (character) development negatively. Students are faced with major sources of stress: low motivation, personal health challenges, faculty deficiencies, interpersonal conflicts, and professional obligations (Chye et al., 2024). Factors such as unclear expectations (Clement, 2016; Haraldseid et al., 2015), especially for students who have to work or have family responsibilities (Clement, 2016); organisational inconsistency, schedule and timing issues (Haraldseid et al., 2015); or bad tutoring (Ilie et al., 2024) can limit or even hinder growth.

Existing studies have used a diverse array of methods to look at the factors listed above. Multiple have used quantitative, typically cross-sectional methods: (self-report) surveys (Bai et al., 2022; Clement, 2016), and scales (García-Álvarez et al., 2024) regression (Greenway et al., 2024), reviewing and meta-analytics (Brown et al., 2023; Gamage et al., 2021; Song, 2024), and even (longitudinal) experimental research (Orona et al., 2024; Tian & Tang, 2025). An example for a longitudinal panel study is the research done on global flourishing by VanderWeele and colleagues (2025). Qualitative and mixed methods are also represented. Han and Rideout (2022) surveyed upper-year undergraduate students, including open-ended questions which yielded insightful qualitative data. Haraldseid and colleagues (2015) used focus group interviews and content analysis to explore a single university's students' views on their learning environment. Ilie and colleagues (2024) as well as Chye and colleagues (2024) used semi-structured interviews to explore students' perspectives. One study even used longitudinal qualitative interviewing to capture transformation in student perspectives across their study years (Ashwin et al., 2016).

Similarly to others (Han & Rideout, 2022), we would like to know how best to support students' development and take Dutch higher education as our study context. It is important to know what students recognise and acknowledge as factors in their development, as the alignment between institutional intentions and delivery can differ. Arthur (2024) found that university mottos already emphasise character virtues. For example, in the Netherlands multiple universities emphasise social responsibility, courage or resilience, and even student flourishing in their visions, but it is often unclear what efforts are made to achieve these educational goals. Moreover, Ilie and colleagues (2024) argue that institutions should first understand the values students attach to their learning gain before measuring it. Bai and colleagues (2022) state that what students perceive to be emphasised in the institution is what they will develop in. Building on this, our qualitative approach seeks to uncover students' own experiences and perspectives, offering a more in-depth understanding of the factors they see as shaping their character development.

Method

Much like Chye and colleagues (2024) and Ilie and colleagues (2024) we used an exploratory qualitative methodology by conducting semi-structured interviews. The interviews were part of a broader longitudinal qualitative data collection aimed at exploring multiple dimensions of IPC character learning gain. For this paper only data corresponding to interview questions about influential factors were included in the analysis. Data addressing other constructs fall outside of the scope of this report.

Data collection

To explore factors that students recognise to be influential to their character development, participants were asked a set of pre-determined open-ended questions (with possible follow-ups) to ensure consistency across interviews. The questions were connected to a set of questions asking students about their own intellectual, performance, and civic virtues that they exhibit, and how they have changed in them so far, therefore there was a conceptual understanding of what they should reflect upon. The questions aimed for students to reflect on their qualities as a learner (performance virtues), an academic and thinker (intellectual virtues), and a citizen (civic virtues). For the latter two, we included a question about the formation of their beliefs about science and citizenship to cast a larger net, because we expected students to have outside influences (e.g., parents, school experiences) on their value development which is in line with previous research. For example, Lin and colleagues (2025) found that a history of civic engagement as well as other factors, such as religion, socioeconomic status, and volunteer history predict future engagement.

Table 1. Interview guide for second year students

Virtue group	Interview questions
Performance virtues	What brought about that change in [your qualities as an undergraduate learner]?
	What do you think helped you and will help you develop as a person during your time at university?*
Intellectual virtues	What brought about that change in [your qualities as an academic and thinker]?
	How have your beliefs about science been formed?
	What do you think helped you and will help you develop as an academic during your time at university?*
Civic virtues	What brought about that change in [your qualities as a citizen]?
	How have your beliefs about citizenship been formed?
	What do you think helped you and will help you develop as a citizen during your time at university?*

*First year students were only asked what they think will help them, and graduates were only asked what helped them. Only second year students were asked both.

Different cohorts were asked slightly different questions based on their study experience (see Table 1.). We did not expect that this would have a significant effect on participants' answers, as even the first-years had been attending their classes of at least two months (but most often more) at the time of their interviews and could identify helpful factors based on experience. In reviewing the first-year interviews, their responses were consistent with those of other students, drawing largely on lived experience rather than expectation and showing similar specificity and depth.

Data collection took place between 2022 October and 2023 March. Students were randomly selected from a pseudonymised list and were sent invitations to participate. This process was repeated until enough students signed up for the study. Students signed an informed consent form that included information on the voluntary nature of their participation, confidentiality, and details of data processing. Interviews were conducted in person, and in English, and each interview lasted between 45-90 minutes. Students were then debriefed about the purpose of the study and were invited to ask any questions pertaining to the study or their data. All interviews were audio recorded, and transcribed using the Amberscript (Amberscript Global B.V., 2025) software.

Participants

The interviewed 83 participants came from three different Dutch universities and four academic disciplines, and they were at different points in their studies: first-year undergraduate students, second-year undergraduate students, and recent bachelor graduates (Table 2.). The first-year students were interviewed again in their second and third years. Since this research reports on cross-sectional data only, those answers are not included in the analysis. Inclusion criteria required that participants are enrolled in a program at one of the three selected Dutch universities, that they are over 18 years old, and they are part of one of the targeted cohorts. Participants were asked to provide some demographic data including their date of birth, gender, nationality, institution, and bachelor program.

Table 2. Participants' demographic information ($n=83$)

Gender	
Male	39
Female	43
Non-binary / third gender	1
Region of origin	
The Netherlands	38
	<i>(of which 35 attended high school in The Netherlands)</i>
EU/EEA	34
	<i>(excluding Dutch students)</i>
Non-EU	11
Academic discipline*	
LAS	24
Alpha	20
Beta	16
Gamma	23
Cohort	
First-year	31 (ages 17-22)
Second-year	30 (ages 19-24)
Graduate	22 (ages 21-27)
Institution	
Tilburg University	45
Maastricht University	22
University of Twente	16

* *Note.* On Dutch disciplines: *LAS* refers to Liberal Arts and Sciences, an interdisciplinary program where students have courses from various disciplines; *alpha* refers to the Humanities and includes majors such as Online culture, Arts and Culture, Philosophy, or Theology; *beta* refers to Technical Sciences, and includes majors such as Computer science, Applied Mathematics, Electrical Engineering; and *gamma* refers to studies about human behaviour, and includes majors such as Psychology, Law, or Economics (*NWO-bijdrage Kennis- en innovatieconvenant 2020-2023, 2020*).

Data analysis

Data was analysed using Atlas.ti 25 (Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2021) software, and an inductive thematic approach. This approach allows organic theme development rather than trying to fit the data into a prescribed framework. First, an open coding phase allowed the understanding of the data, then selective coding allowed the organisation and definition of each code, until a refined codebook was established. The thematic structure was established by first writing topic summaries and then the research team worked together through an iterative process connecting the topic summaries into a structure of meaning that answers the research question: 'What factors do students recognise to be influential in their IPC character learning gain during their undergraduate studies?'

Results

Thematic analysis yielded five themes: learning community, educational activities, support system, life lessons, and student characteristics.

Learning community

The theme 'learning community' refers to the social and academic environment in which students learn. It captures the students' experiences of togetherness, the importance of social cohesion, the academic atmosphere and campus setting, as well as academic freedom and the different perspectives present in the context.

Social support clearly means much to students. They enjoy the benefits of studying together with others. Studying in a community helps them be effective, inspired, curious, and accountable as they support each other's progress.

I feel that people around me are a very strong indicator of how I'm going to grow in this environment. (P29)

The interview data show that the learning community is beneficial to intellectual, performance, and civic character development alike and without social cohesion many express they would struggle. People with shared interests provide an accountability system: they encourage one another, which increases their motivation and confidence. Having someone to reach out to helps overcome challenges. Students correct each other's mistakes, inspire reflection, and the international atmosphere makes students feel like citizens of the world.

Although students emphasise the importance of like-minded peers with similar academic interests, they also appreciate exposure to different perspectives. Students connect this to the multicultural diversity of the community.

I think it really puts you on the spot and you question whether the moral views and just the general mindset of your country, of your nation, of your community is the right one. (P5)

They express that their minds are more open and their ideas are more nuanced because of the exciting discussions between (and about) these different perspectives with people who have diverse backgrounds and values. This helps them question their own ideas, work in teams, and think deeply. They reflect on the growing open-mindedness and tolerance they experience due to these discussions, and the feeling of being heard and understood.

They also appreciate the academic atmosphere of the university, which is described as open, respectful, inclusive, non-judgemental, and serious. Many also emphasise the challenging atmosphere of the university environment: how they overcome the challenges set by the university is a precedent to how they will conduct themselves as adults. The university is also a physical place where they feel at home: the campus provides an environment that they associate with learning.

Multiple students highlight a specific aspect of the institutional atmosphere, the freedom to shape a personalised learning experience: for some this is the moment to become responsible for their own learning in their own pace and according to their own interests. A few students expressed how much they value academic freedom too: they can write about whatever they want to and can arrive to their own conclusions about important issues.

But this was the first time that [...] you write a paper on what you choose. So, this was way more freedom, which was quite a big intellectual challenge in that I had to be courageous and make tough decisions for the first time. (P40)

Students did not only reflect on beneficial factors: some community-related experiences seem to hinder character learning gain. It is clear that students appreciate the social dimension of university, and when that was taken away for many during the COVID-19 pandemic, they struggled with cancelled courses and exchanges, dropouts, and the loss of community.

The contact with your fellow students also kind of fell apart. [...] It was just very lonely. (P83)

It is apparent that students struggle without their peers or classes (even outside of the COVID-19 pandemic): many do not appreciate exclusively online courses or when they have to work alone too much. Some complained about courses that did not challenge them enough. Moreover, a few students had issues with hierarchy, academic pretentiousness and meritocracy: students appreciated simple language, openness, and down-to earth thinking instead of trying to be part of the 'elite'. When talking about civic development, some students expressed wanting to disengage because of the state of politics in the world which is experienced to be frustrating and stressful. Moreover, two students experienced xenophobia in the Netherlands which they identify as a factor in them wanting to draw back from civic affairs.

Educational activities

The theme 'educational activities' describes the structured teaching and learning methods designed to facilitate development, including course content and assessment practices, different pedagogical practices, and extracurricular options, such as study and student associations, exchange options, and (work) opportunities.

Students' answers were full of appreciation for the content knowledge they receive. Some emphasised that the information they got made them curious critical thinkers. Content was most pronounced in its contribution to intellectual and civic development. Intellectually, students were excited about understanding science, and some about the holistic-mindedness that comes with understanding the connections between various topics in their field. Through assignments and readings students expressed they learnt 'how science is done' and were introduced to different perspectives. As for civic virtues, participants reflected on the fact that university provides content on social and political affairs such as political systems and laws, human psychology, ethics, job-specific knowledge, philosophy, or critical thinking. This content helps them form their own opinions and apply their knowledge as citizens.

What I'm learning in university is that it's content that helps me to understand what is happening around the world. (P10)

They also point out the benefits of being assessed: it helps feel accomplished and serves as a check-in whether one's ideas are good. Feedback was indicated as the most useful aspect of it: it helps improve critical thinking, reflection, and it serves as encouragement and guidance.

Challenges were also emphasised as a good thing for development. Students think going through tough tasks improved their perseverance, critical thinking, and open-mindedness through challenging their preconceived ideas, and engaged them producing success.

Participants noted various educational practices (methods of teaching and learning) that were useful for them. Debating, writing papers, deadlines and weekly assignments, and even exams were thought to be helpful in character development. Most importantly, students reflected on the beneficial effects of practice (conscious, applied repetition). Some highlighted classes themselves, and discussions of content as important learning opportunities, and teamwork activities (often in small groups) as advantageous, because it helped them improve as academics in their passion, compassion, confidence, trust, cooperation, and effective communication.

You have to find this balance between listening to what you want to do with the project and also trusting people and keeping the peace. (P65)

Moreover, students pointed out that when they are being presented with various perspectives content-wise (whether in an interdisciplinary program or not), it cultivates their curiosity, critical thinking, and open-mindedness. Some express the struggle of having to accept they do not know everything, and the difficulty of opening up to others' ideas instead of just doing things their own way, growing their humility.

Students note the benefits of belonging to an association or participating in extracurricular activities. These activities do not only widen the social circle of the students but also expand their view beyond the content of the curriculum.

The broadening of my perspective and my worldview was really because of university [...] enabled that through different workshops. [...] I think there's a lot more than just classes. (P79)

Students emphasise that they appreciate the opportunities they are afforded through the association, such as meeting the mayor, going to city hall, speaking to politicians, organising social events, sports events, being student representative, helping with career choices, as well as other opportunities the university provides, such as mentor programmes, skills courses, work positions (being a research or teaching assistant), or internships. Multiple students mentioned their exchange as one of the opportunities during their bachelor that they appreciated, because it helped them develop in their confidence, or independence.

Educational activities can also lead to negative experiences. Students often complained about having unclear expectations or useless assignments or struggled to find out what they are supposed to do for class, exams, or during class. Furthermore, participants often struggled with the university schedule: very early or late classes were highlighted as a factor in missed classes or no motivation. Some students struggled with the high workload: this also had an effect on motivation. Some found that their classes had too much theory, and they were missing content that focused more on the application of their course material. A couple of students noted that because the university is so expensive, they had to work next to their studies and thus felt like they fell behind their peers who did not have to do the same.

Support system

The theme 'support system' represent the network of people and institutional help that provide affective, academic, and practical assistance to students. This includes family and friends, and organisational support, such as teachers, the campus psychologist and academic advisors.

Some students experience the support of the university as positive and helpful, which included scheduling help, help with transition, teaching assistants, teachers and professors, study advisors, and even the campus psychologist. Students mention having meetings with the advisors and/or psychologist to ask about difficult study decisions or mental health issues and receiving emotional support or even substantial help with the organisation of their studies.

Teachers were conceptualised as the biggest support: they answer content-related questions but are also there to help give advice. Students pointed out teachers who are very good at explaining the material, or teachers who helped them learn how to study. Some pointed out that their expertise, passion, or motivation is something they look up to and find inspiration in. Teachers are believed to be a great support especially in acquiring intellectual qualities. Students noted their support and encouragement.

The tutors are just very active and engaging, [...] it feels either way that they genuinely care about you. (P35)

They also remarked on their teachers' content knowledge, feedback and expertise which was very useful in classes, as well as the different perspectives they provided. Students appreciated the close relationships they were able to establish with teachers, multiple students testifying to the benefits of the teachers' openness and approachability.

Parents seem to have an important role in students' university experiences as well. Many students highlight the different ways their parents supported them, be it emotionally (a listening ear in sadness and joy), intellectually (doing assignments together), financially (paying for education and accommodation), behaviourally (helping to make decisions and act in certain ways) or just being a sounding board when the students feel lost, and even going with them on new adventures (for example when moving abroad). Multiple students expressed wishes to 'give back' to their parents out of gratitude (after graduation, or by working during their studies). Even siblings and other family members sometimes provided inspiration for the participants by setting an example.

Students also talked about their parents' mindset. Many of them listed the expectations their parents had toward them for example about what they have to become or how to behave, to which students reacted by either wanting to prove themselves to their parents independently, or rebel against their ideas. Some parents seem to question the students about their study choices, and some have preconceived notions of what their lives must look like.

I want to stop, looking for things and then thinking: okay, would my parents approve? I want to detach myself from that and like find my own way [...] and act according to my own interests. (P78)

Some parents however have a different mindset and encourage their children to go beyond grades: to explore, be curious, and to study for themselves, not for performance scores, which students explicitly appreciate.

If I got a 6, they were just as happy as when I got an 8. And it was also with friends and family around me; it was never about the grade [...]. Everyone around me was always trying to enjoy life in their own way. (P58)

Friends are also part of the support system. For some of these students, friendships even add more value to education than learning knowledge or skills. Friends are also a source of inspiration: many students talk about their friends' achievements, or how they helped them find their way.

I happen to have a bunch of very driven, very confident friends who are all experts in their fields. And them being this passionate and this good in what they do also encouraged me to become better at what I do. (P82)

Last but not least, friends are also quite important for some for specifically the civic area of life: they discuss political issues with their friends and even do civic actions with them (like recycling in their student flat). For some civic contribution lies in their helpful behaviour towards their friends.

The support system does not always work in students' favour. Some students noted bad teaching practices: teachers who have not changed their teaching methods in a long time, teachers who are not interesting or are even confused about their own subjects. Multiple students experienced exclusion, insensitivity, and a general lack of support from teachers or advisors, but even from their own (student) community. This leads to confusion, misunderstandings, and disengagement from the institution. Finally, some compared themselves to peers strongly (which produced much stress), and a few students specified this to be some sort of sibling comparison (often imposed upon them by themselves). Friends may also be a point of negative peer comparison: multiple students talked about feeling inferior to some

of their friends and this feeling affecting them in a negative way. Furthermore, many students experienced a low point, or negative feelings in connection with losing friends at university or losing friends who they had to leave behind when moving to the Netherlands for their studies.

Life lessons

The theme 'life lessons' encompasses developmental factors beyond academic influences. This theme reflects students' insights about contextual factors and unintended experiences such as independence from parents, failure, the search for meaning, experience with time, growth, and even therapy.

First, across all areas of virtues, independence emerges as a dominant factor. Students consistently describe becoming independent as transformative. Both a challenge and factor in growth, participants noted that a significant factor in their performance virtue development was the fact that they suddenly had to conduct their lives independently. Doing basic chores, grocery shopping, or finding housing (whether moving within the country or internationally) had a big impact on their perceived self-development. The need to 'be an adult' and be responsible for their own actions meant that they had to figure out things alone and quickly, not just at home away from their parents, but also at university in finding their own way within the curriculum. Students talk about their independence as an important factor in their intellectual development too. They need to work alone and be responsible for their own learning ('during the exam, no one is going to help you', P64). Multiple students emphasise the factor of independence in their civic development as well. As they enter into adulthood by moving out from home, having to pay taxes, cooking for themselves, or even choosing to recycle are actions they feel are bringing them closer to their civic selves, although some feel that their civic life is still further away, beyond university.

[Y]ou kind of derive [that] voting is important or like caring about what the government is doing is important because my money is going there. (P7)

Second, students frequently point to experience, natural improvement with time and maturity, as a factor in their development. It can mean intellectual growth such as the acceptance of doing things imperfectly and growing confident in the process, or civic growth in awareness about society and the experience of the 'dark side' of society (like homophobia, antisemitism, etc.). Students learn how they can react to these issues.

[A]s time goes by you further develop yourself. So, I think just as time will pass, I will find things to overcome weaknesses that I'm still struggling with right now. (P46)

Third, multiple students specifically mention failure as an important learning moment that helped them develop. Failure teaches things that they will never forget again. It also teaches them a lot about where they need to change and gives them the motivation and perseverance to do better.

[I]f I fail a subject, I go: okay, why did I fail? But normally, when I do things okay, I don't strive to do better. (P41)

Fourth, some students pointed out that they went to therapy and this was extremely useful for them. Therapy helped them overcome situations and anxieties that prevented them from doing well in school, and they appreciated the professional help they got.

Finally, students note that they develop especially well when they see why something matters. Purpose and values make effort worthwhile and shape motivation. Finding meaning is personal: it helps makes sense of their studies and their work ('it gave me a purpose and showed me what I'm interested

in in the world', P59). Some describe it as a feeling, finding passion, and some also associate it with contribution to society.

Student characteristics

The theme 'student characteristics' refers to individual dispositions that affect how students approach their own learning and development. The theme captures students' beliefs, their ideas of the purpose of education, their motivation and their tendency to take initiative, and their unique personal environments.

Participants identified their own thought processes and beliefs that acted in the formation of their scientific thinking. For example, multiple students expressed the need to be motivated and regulate their own motivation to stay on track with their studies. Moreover, curiosity about knowledge and the truth drives many of them; and multiple participants mention critical thinking, the questioning of scientific results and experts as their guides in the academic field, where objectivity, falsifiability, and trust need to be constantly evaluated. Part of this motivation and curiosity is actively seeking knowledge and going after opportunities themselves. They see self-initiative as a driver of learning and personal development.

[T]he drive of continuing and not just studying for the sake of passing my exams and getting a career, but actually really understanding what I'm learning is important to me as a person. (P53)

Many students express their opinions on education as a concept. For a few it may be a natural step after high school, but for others it is a personal endeavour of finding passion and opportunities, having dialogue, learning to do 'good' things with knowledge, and of cultural transmission and continuity. One person in particular talks a lot about their educational philosophy: for them education is socially constructed, and a part of life, teaching people how to act meaningfully in situations.

I don't find myself in a good position when I'm not sure about what I'm fighting for. [A]nd that's why education is important. (P3)

Development may also be shaped by intersecting environments of family, media, school, and self-reflection. For intellectual virtues, students reflected on their home environment as an important factor: parental and family ideas of what science is. For example, parents may highlight the importance of scientific inquiry (often because the parents themselves are scientists); or on the contrary, show a conservative or religious upbringing that defies scientific standards (except for one person for whom religion is a driver of scientific curiosity). They also identified media as an important source of thoughts on science: how pop culture, the news, or social media represent science and scientific inquiry plays a role in the students' perception of what science is and how it can be used. A few students reflected on the interplay of science and media: how science is (mis)represented in the media and as a result what non-scientific ideas persist in common knowledge. Finally, school and/or university are named as important agents in scientific training. Many students argued that it was in class that their ideas about science have been formed through the content of the lectures. Moreover, teachers' scientific thinking in their educational institutions are noted important.

As for civic virtues, students named their upbringing, their parents, families and the communities around them (for example religious groups) as main actors in their civic education. They talk about how they take over how their parents act, but also how other people in their communities do. Students also reflected on the importance of *where* they are. They reflected on the differences in civic responsibility between when they lived in a small village or a big city, and whether they lived in their home country and birthplace or abroad. Opinions differed in where they felt more the pressure of

looking out for their community (some felt the community more important in a village, some in the city). The socio-political atmosphere of these places also play an important role in their civic qualities: some students see very different things in their home country than in the Netherlands and this affects them in various ways (for example wanting to act at home but not in the Netherlands, or the contrary, happy to protest in the Netherlands but scared at home). Finally, students highlighted the role of media (social media, news, TV, etc.) in forming civic ideas and producing engagement with diverse ideas and people.

My views about citizenship have obviously been formed through just engagement with people and, media and TV programs, music itself as well, reading the newspaper, seeing the prime minister on television. (P69)

A few students express that volunteering, making donations, or generally thinking of or sharing with others made them develop in their civic qualities. However, this seems to be personal: only a couple of students talk about volunteering and civic work connected to their institution.

On a more negative note, a few students experienced health problems throughout their studies which disrupted their ability to stay motivated and engaged. Some expressed that having no motivation lead to them studying or learning less or that they sometimes procrastinate because of it. A few students noted that having been a 'talented' learner in early years, they struggled with their studies later because they never learnt how to overcome challenges and did not know how to deal with failure.

Discussion

In this paper we have studied bachelor students' perception of their own character learning gain development throughout their undergraduate study. The aim of the research was to discover what students think influences their intellectual, performance, and civic character development during university. The results are a diverse assortment of factors students recognise to be drivers or even hindrances of their development.

To discuss these results, we turn to the theoretical framework of character 'caught', character 'taught', and character 'sought' (*The Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues, 2022*). This typology aims to categorise educational processes into different strategies of character development, thus it is helpful in organising the results. Although the framework was originally written mainly for school education, the findings suggest that it is easily adaptable for universities thus strongly contributing to the theoretical framework. Character 'caught' is a process of internalising and reacting to traits surrounding the students as they witness the atmosphere around them. Character 'taught' means the explicit efforts made at developing students' character. Character 'sought' refers to how students pursue their own development with their decisions and commitments. In the following section we will discuss the results according to this framework.

Character 'caught'

This category involves institutional environment, institutional vision and culture, relationships, and staff influence (*The Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues, 2022*). In our results students credit a large part of their development to factors pertaining to this category. The learning community, togetherness, international atmosphere and (academic) freedom, as well as the support from family, friends, and caring teachers are perceived to contribute strongly to students' character learning gain. This is in line with other research findings (Bai et al., 2022; Haraldseid et al., 2015; Ilie et al., 2024; Lamb et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2025; Song, 2024). Teachers are appreciated for more than content knowledge: students look to them for more than authority in their field, they are role models too, a well-research concept in

character education (Chye et al., 2024; Lamb et al., 2022; Orona et al., 2024; Song, 2024). Li (2025) argues that social connectedness is the most influential protective factor in students flourishing, while Chye and colleagues (2024) count it among the resilience protective mechanisms that help manage challenges.

Due to recent Dutch governmental policy, the openness to international students in the Netherlands is no longer self-evident (*Forse Daling Instroom Internationale Studenten, Universiteiten Van Nederland, 2025*). Although explicit teaching activities may be directed at character development, based on our results, the loss of the international atmosphere would hinder character development as students would no longer be exposed to different viewpoints and cultures.

It is worth highlighting that multiple students reflected on the presence of (academic) freedom in light of their character development. This concept not only means their freedom to choose education they like, but also the freedom of academics to write about controversial topics and reach conclusions that do not necessarily align with overall opinions. This can be partly connected to multiple results from other research about autonomy and self-management. Students are clearly more engaged and intrigued by content that is relevant to them (Han & Rideout, 2022), and the afforded freedom to choose their own path and arrive to their own conclusions. This finding is echoed in the study by Ilie and colleagues (2024) who found that intentionality and autonomy are essential to learning gain.

Institutional environment was not the only factor in this category. Students talked about the influences of their upbringing, home environment, and even (social) media in forming their dispositions and thoughts on science. This finding highlights the ever-growing need to train students' critical thinking to shield them from the influences of misrepresentation of facts and the post-truth environment they face.

Some of our findings may help extend the framework by including new factors in this category. These factors are independence, experience, and failure. The move away from parents or other authority figures is an important step in students' identity development. This developmental stage, during which many go to university is called emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2014) which is often characterised by the beginning of an independent life and of uncertainty and exploration. This exploration is recognised by the students to be influential in their development for example in gradually gaining independence vis-a-vis their parents or becoming engaged citizens. Moreover, students highlight experience with time and maturity as a factor. Although this could be easily dismissed as natural, De Prada and colleagues (2022) similarly found that 'as students progress through the courses and gain more experience, they develop their skills more efficiently' and 'first-year students' reflective capacity, maturity, and commitment may be less developed than in later years' (p. 9). Finally, students remarked the learning moment failure afforded them. Han and Rideout (2022) also found that overcoming failures helped students adapt to the demands of being an undergraduate student, and Chye and colleagues (2024) note that unforeseen events can contribute to building resilience. Today, teachers, higher education institutions, and parents sometimes try to (overly) protect students from the experience of failure, whereas it is an integral part of resilience development and performance learning gain (Leesen & Van Lenning, 2025), and it seems students recognise this benefit. Although not something to aim at when constructing educational activities, failure can be an important lesson to focus on when supporting student character development.

Character 'taught'

Character 'taught' refers to the curriculum, teaching and learning methods, and learning activities that are used to character educate (*The Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues, 2022*). Based on our results, within this category we do not only refer to content and activities that were intended for character education, but to factors that students recognise to fit into the typology of this group.

Content knowledge and assignments were some of the most important influences for students on their character development as it made them reflect on their surroundings and different perspectives. Content, resources and reflections about these have been found to be useful for development before (Bai et al., 2022). Discussions, practice, and teamwork were all attributed to development which is in line with previous research (Chen et al., 2023; Han & Rideout, 2022; Lamb et al., 2022), as well as the willing participation in challenges (Jiao et al., 2024). However, the relationship between knowledge and the people students become may be one of the most unclear ones, and thus more research must be directed at what type of content influences character learning gain.

Policy indications could be to have more emphasis on class discussions, teamwork, debates, and challenges among students. This may pose a challenge for universities, as more and more expand their educational programs globally online (Morris et al., 2020). On the one hand, our results suggest that there is much to be gained from small groups and dialogue between students, and the disintegration of the community with off-campus teaching may threaten character development. Thus, universities may have a good reason to invest in on-campus learning. On the other hand, some students argued that the cost of university, or the need to work alongside their studies makes their learning difficult. Prioritising campus-based formats too strongly may therefore risk reinforcing elitism and undermining efforts to keep higher education accessible.

Character 'sought'

This category refers to chosen experiences outside of the official curriculum (*The Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues*, 2022). Our results are in line with much of the framework's original factors. Students acknowledge the benefits of extracurricular activities and being part of study and student associations. Moreover, students have multiple experiences of volunteering and community-related actions that they identify as factors in their civic development similarly to the theoretical framework (*The Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues*, 2022). Although Lin and colleagues (2025) argue that organised civic activities and service learning increases civic engagement in the long term, our participants did not highlight many civic experiences connected to their institution. It is not clear why this is the case, but universities may take a look for example at the amount, availability, or desirability of the civic engagement options they offer.

The character 'caught', 'taught', and 'sought' framework focuses solely on the teaching and training of character, and while it does not currently intend to include factors outside of institutional influence, it may miss the opportunity to incorporate external factors into institutional practices, such as factors that students bring with themselves with their individual traits, that influence their chosen experiences. Students argued that their own motivation, and their disposition to take initiative and find meaning are drivers of their character development, possible additions to the character 'sought' category. Similarly, Jiao and colleagues (2024) found that a sense of purpose and learning effort were highly correlated with student growth, and Villacís and colleagues (2021) argue that curiosity, a love of learning, perseverance, and self-control are important to flourishing in education. Han and Rideout (2022) also argue that intrapersonal thriving – a positive outlook towards the self and learning – and an interest in academic subjects contributes to thriving at university. Maladaptive behaviours like procrastination or self-criticism in the absence of protective intrapersonal factors such as resilience or motivation can hinder development (Li, 2025), a finding also recognised by our participants.

Conclusion

This study explored factors students recognise to be influential in their IPC character learning gain during their undergraduate studies. This study recruited participants who are likely more motivated

and satisfied with their studies than average, which is a limitation to the results. Had less engaged students been interviewed, perhaps we could have more insight into what hinders their character development and what they are missing. Moreover, although the discussion clearly followed questions on character virtues specifically, students may have reflected on factors influencing a wider scope of development than just character. From the interviews it is not possible to know whether the factors they mention were originally intended to character educate or just do implicitly. For example, content or learning activities intended at character development and activities that are factors in character development can be two different things, which is why longitudinal research into how individuals develop could provide valuable insight into character growth.

It is not possible to say that the university can control learning gain fully through the learning environment (character ‘caught’) or the learning activities (character ‘taught’), and we know little about what students seek to grow (character ‘sought’) because of the missing student perspective from the literature. The university’s ambition to teach certain virtues and what the students experience may not always be aligned, which is why it is so crucial to hear what students have to say about the factors already known through empirical research. This paper adds to the theoretical framework extending it to the university context and by voicing student opinions to open up the discussion into factors extending beyond university training.

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