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Bridging Knowledge and Character: Cultivating Student Development through Islamic Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play a pivotal role in advancing comprehensive and balanced human capital development. Amid rapid globalization, digital transformation, and the erosion of moral values, HEIs face increasing challenges in cultivating well-rounded individuals who can meet contemporary demands while upholding ethical and spiritual principles. As market-driven education increasingly prioritizes technical and professional competencies, the nurturing of moral integrity and holistic growth is often neglected. Therefore, this study investigates how the Arabic Language Education Program contributes to holistic human capital development through Islamic educational leadership, focusing on students' lived experiences, leadership formation, and value-based educational practices. Employing a mixed-methods approach with an exploratory sequential design, the research commenced with qualitative data collection through interviews with 50 informants and document analysis, followed by a quantitative survey involving 184 respondents. Data were analyzed thematically and descriptively, and findings from both phases were triangulated to enhance interpretive validity. The study identifies four principal dimensions of human capital development: (i) Leadership Experiences and Opportunities, (ii) Religious Development and Spiritual Strengthening, (iii) Local and Socio-Cultural Influences, and (iv) Challenges and Obstacles in Human Capital Development. The findings provide critical insights for policymakers and stakeholders in refining leadership policies and educational strategies, thereby reinforcing the foundations of human development agendas at both national and global levels.

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INTRODUCTION

Human capital encompasses the knowledge, skills, and qualities within individuals that can be developed and optimized (Mohd Haridi et al., 2020). It is a key driver of national transformation and economic progress, consistent with Human Capital Theory, which positions productive and innovative individuals as central to growth (Schultz, 1961). From an Islamic perspective, human capital is grounded in knowledge (*'ilm*), moral character (*akhlaq*), and values that advance collective well-being. Islam offers a comprehensive framework that integrates material and spiritual dimensions to achieve holistic human and societal prosperity (Hussen et al., 2022).

Education plays a critical role in shaping human capital. In Malaysia, the National Education Philosophy emphasizes the development of a balanced and competent generation (Rosli et al., 2022). Student participation in academic and non-academic programs contributes to talent development and readiness for future employment (Mohammad & Wan Mat, 2024). At the higher education level, leadership formation and soft skills are strengthened through experiential and value-based learning, producing graduates who are ethical, innovative, and socially responsible.

Despite these aspirations, Malaysia continues to face challenges in nurturing morally resilient human capital. Rising concerns include bullying (Dahaman et al., 2023), increasing HIV infections among university students (Rosidi et al., 2025), and a wider moral decline among youth (Hashim, 2020). These issues stem from intertwined factors such as peer influence, environmental conditions, and unregulated digital exposure (Abd Radzak et al., 2023). These challenges indicate a broader decline in moral resilience, which undermines long-term human capital sustainability. Similar concerns emerge across Southeast Asia, where transnational higher education seeks to balance academic excellence with cultural and moral preservation (Tran et al., 2022). Although initiatives promoting student engagement, holistic well-being, and financial support have been introduced (Mohamad Halim et al., 2025), their impact remains limited. The weakening capacity of youth to exhibit self-leadership further illustrates this concern. Self-leadership is fundamental to personal growth and societal contribution. Therefore, contextual and integrative approaches are needed to strengthen character formation and ensure that graduates are capable of managing themselves, leading responsibly, and contributing to national development (Arfiani, 2023).

In response, this study posits that Arabic language programs in Islamic higher education can function as transformative platforms for character and leadership development. These institutions bear the responsibility of nurturing intellectual competence alongside moral integrity. Scholars in Islamic education highlight the need to integrate intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions within leadership formation (Sahrodi & Karim, 2025). Such integration begins with self-awareness and extends to broader social leadership. Distinguishing itself from earlier studies that focused mainly on curriculum or student participation (Rekan et al., 2025; Alwi et al., 2024), this research examines how Arabic language programs shape students' identities, discipline, and leadership potential. It explores how students' lived experiences within these programs contribute to value-based human capital development in Malaysian higher education. Ultimately, the study proposes an Islamic character-centered model that responds to Malaysia's sociocultural realities while aligning with global aspirations for ethical and sustainable leadership.

METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using an exploratory sequential design to examine human capital development within a Malaysian higher education institution. This design was selected to obtain a contextual and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon by integrating informants' lived experiences with quantitative validation. The use of multiple data sources enabled methodological triangulation and strengthened the interpretive validity of the findings (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The study began with a qualitative phase to explore informants' perceptions, followed by a quantitative phase to validate and extend the initial results, consistent with previous research on human capital development (Ariani et al., 2022).

Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of human capital development through informants' narratives. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. These techniques allowed informants to articulate their experiences freely and contributed to rich and diverse insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews generated detailed individual accounts, while FGDs encouraged interactive exchanges that highlighted shared perceptions (Creswell, 2018). Document analysis added contextual information not evident from interview data alone.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's thematic framework involving data condensation, display, and conclusion verification (Miles et al., 2014). Atlas.ti version 9 was used to support systematic coding and mapping of relationships among data segments. To facilitate data management and maintain analytical precision, a systematic coding framework was developed to identify the exact position of each quotation within the interview transcripts. This framework, presented in Table 1, enhanced traceability and transparency throughout the data analysis process.

Table 1: Research Informant Coding Framework

<table>
<tr><td>I</td><td>A</td><td>B</td><td>C</td><td>D</td><td>E</td><td>00</td><td>.I @ FGD</td><td>00</td></tr>
<tr><td>Informant</td><td colspan="5">A: Employed ALP alumni
B: ALP alumni at the undergraduate level
C: ALP alumni at the foundation level
D: Current ALP students
E: ALP Lecture</td><td>Informant number</td><td>I: Individual
FGD: Focus Group Discussion</td><td>Interview number</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="9">Example:
"Therefore, ALP can firstly foster a deep interest in the Arabic language." I/A01.I01</td></tr>
</table>

The emergent sub-themes and overarching themes provided theoretical insights into human capital development and served as the conceptual foundation for constructing the survey instrument in the subsequent quantitative phase (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase was designed to validate and generalize the qualitative insights. A survey questionnaire was developed based on the major themes identified in the qualitative analysis, in accordance with the principles of exploratory sequential design. The survey was administered to students of the Arabic Language Program (ALP) from the 2012/2013 to 2023/2024 academic sessions. A total of 184 responses were obtained, exceeding the minimum sample size of 162 recommended by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) for a population of 278 ALP students. The inclusion of multiple cohorts provided a broader temporal perspective and strengthened representativeness (Creswell, 2018).

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using mean scores and standard deviations with SPSS version 29.0. The descriptive analysis revealed patterns, central tendencies, and distribution trends that complemented the qualitative findings. Interpretation of mean scores followed the scale proposed by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), as shown in Table 2. These quantitative results provided measurable evidence that supported and extended the interpretive conclusions (Bryman, 2016).

Table 2: Mean Score Interpretation

Mean Score Range	Interpretation
1.00 - 2.00	Low
2.01 - 3.00	Moderately Low
3.01 - 4.00	Moderately High
4.01 - 5.00	High

Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

The study employed methodological and data triangulation to ensure analytical rigor and to deepen understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Triangulation validated findings across sources, strengthened the theoretical and empirical contributions, and addressed the contextual complexity of the research questions. Integrating both data strands produced mutually reinforcing conclusions that enhanced the validity, dependability, and overall coherence of the study. The exploratory sequential design effectively combined the strengths of qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative findings informed the development of the quantitative instrument, while the quantitative results verified and expanded the qualitative insights. Purposive sampling supported contextual relevance and empirical rigor (Patton, 2015). Overall, the integrated analysis offered a holistic perspective that aligned with the study's aim to connect individual experiences with broader institutional patterns of human capital development.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Leadership Experiences and Opportunities

Participation in student associations emerges as a key avenue for leadership development, providing meaningful opportunities that strengthen human capital and support character formation. Consistent with Rekan et al. (2025), the findings affirm that involvement in leadership roles within Islamic higher education cultivates teamwork, communication, and organizational management skills. However, this study extends previous interpretations by framing leadership as a holistic process of self-leadership and moral cultivation grounded in Islamic values.

Leadership practices observed through student associations, project-based activities, and co-curricular engagements were found to enhance students' abilities in communication, collaboration, and problem-solving, while simultaneously nurturing moral awareness, empathy, and social responsibility (Abu Samah et al., 2022). These findings indicate that leadership experiences within Islamic higher education are inherently formative, contributing to the development of both ethical consciousness and the practical competencies needed to lead oneself and others effectively. The following excerpts illustrate how students engaged in these transformative leadership activities.

> *"HABIBAT is the most significant student organization, uniting students from the ALP and Foundation programs in Sabah and Sarawak. Additionally, we are affiliated with other organizations, including the College Action Committee (CAC) and the Student Representative Council (SRC)." I/A10.I05*

The results also demonstrate the presence of multiple student associations within the institution. The study revealed that the activities organized by these associations were predominantly accessible to all students, with the exception of those arranged by HABIBAT (Borneo Islamic Youth Association), which mainly targeted the involvement of students from Sarawak and Sabah, specifically those in the ALP program. This aspect is further reflected in the following excerpts from the interview data: "Programs

organized by SRC and CAC are mandatory for all students, regardless of their affiliation with ALP or Foundation, with the exception of those organized by HABIBAT." I/B24.FGD05

Additionally, it was determined that HABIBAT offered a valuable platform for the development of leadership and organizational strategies among students during their academic careers. This was demonstrated when students were granted complete autonomy in the management of the association by participating in leadership roles. Their personal development was significantly influenced by these experiences, particularly in the area of effective organizational administration (Zulkifli et al., 2022). The informant who provided the following information confirmed this:

> *"I was assigned a substantial amount of responsibility as the Vice President of HABIBAT following my tenure in ALP. This has been the custom for generations. They are the ones who assume the leadership of HABIBAT for the subsequent tenure when they transition from ALP to Foundation." I/B20.FGD04*

The study further revealed that ALP students who successfully completed their program were assigned the responsibility of managing HABIBAT upon advancing to the foundation level, in accordance with these findings. In reality, ALP students were also granted leadership positions in other organizations, including the Student Representative Council (SRC) and the College Action Committee (CAC), during their tenure in the foundation program. One of the informants emphasized this: "In fact, ALP students are trusted to assume specific roles upon entering the foundation program due to our prior experience in organizational management." I/A10.I05

The lecturers' observations served to further solidify their confidence in their ability to assume these responsibilities, as demonstrated in the following excerpts: *"ALP students are the ones we can rely on and appoint as committee members, even in student activities here. For instance, we typically designate ALP students as emcees for Arabic language programs."*I/P03.I03.

This situation indirectly enhanced the organizational leadership abilities of students, granting them valuable experience that was advantageous during their transition to the workforce following graduation (Suradi & Rosli, 2020). Furthermore, one informant stated that the influence of their participation in student associations was apparent during their academic pursuits:

> *"My leadership abilities were substantially enhanced by my one-year tenure at HABIBAT, which I subsequently extended beyond the confines of the campus. For example, I became actively involved in the X affiliate of the HIKMAH organization in X. I implemented the leadership skills I acquired in ALP in my involvement in HIKMAH programs."I/B20.FGD04*

The survey data indicated a notable response regarding opportunities for participation in student organizations. The item *'Throughout ALP, I was given opportunities and space to be actively involved in student organizational management'* (Mean = 4.55), indicating a high level of agreement. This signifies that students were given the opportunity to participate in many organizational activities during their time at university. Additional information regarding this aspect is provided in Table 4.

Furthermore, students' involvement in diverse programs was determined to enhance their potential. In this study, the researcher classified these programs into two primary categories, academic and non-academic as depicted in the table below:

Table 3: Classification of Programs Attended by ALP Students

No	Program	Interview Data	Informant
Academic Programs			
1.	*Muntada* (Language Theater)	*"Muntada is like a theater performance in Arabic and English."*	I/A07.FGD02

2.	*Mukhayyam Lughawi* (Language Camp)	*"Mukhayyam Lughawi is an Arabic and English language learning program."*	I/B12.FGD03
3.	*English Workshop*	*"Recently, we had an Academic Committee program, namely the English Workshop."*	I/D36.FGD07
4.	*Malaysia fi Qulubina, Hubbul Watan* (Malaysia in Our Hearts, nurturing Love for the Nation)	*"Activities related to the Arabic language certainly exist. For example, I once joined the program Malaysia fi Qulubina, Hubbul Watan."*	I/B21.FGD04
Non-Academic Programs			
1.	*Rehlah HABIBAT* (HABIBAT Excursion)	*"For me personally, I had the experience of organizing a rehlah program."*	I/B15.FGD03
2.	Cultural Program	*"MALDEMA is a program that also focuses on cultural aspects of various states. It was enjoyable because we learned about other states' cultures and the dialects used."*	I/B12.FGD03
3.	Sport Activities	*"I represented University X in a netball competition."*	I/A07.FGD02
4.	Media Programs	*"We organized the 'Photo of The Year' competition to see how each committee documented their memories."*	I/A10.I05
5.	*Tautan Kasih* (Bond of Affection)	*"During ALP, we organized the Tautan Kasih program, led by ALP students under HABIBAT."*	I/B24.FGD05
6.	*Hari Warisan HABIBAT* (HABIBAT Leadership Appointment Day)	*"Previously, during ALP, we organized the Tautan Kasih program, led by ALP students under HABIBAT."*	I/B24.FGD05

Table 3 above illustrates that student involvement in the programs not only facilitated the development of leadership and organizational management abilities, but also offered them valuable experiences (Surjana et al., 2025). During the *Mukhayyam Lughawi* (Language Camp) program which was organized by the students, one student organizer volunteered the position of speakers when the originally scheduled presenter was unable to attend. This meaningful experience was captured in the following excerpt:

> *"One of the sweetest memories was when we had to fill in for the lecturer who could not make it due to unforeseen circumstances. So, it was us who shared and taught what was supposed to be covered during that session." I/B21.FGD04*

This scenario further corroborates prior research indicating that participation in leadership activities enhances emotional competence and the capacity to effectively control responses to diverse circumstances (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023). Alongside their engagement in academically focused programs, ALP students were also found to be actively involved in non-academic activities, such as Arabic language debate competitions at the local level, with some even advancing to international stages. This was shared by one of the lecturers during the interview session:

> *"Recently, we sent representatives for the Arabic debate competition for the Deputy Vice-Chancellor's Trophy. In this competition, I also sent a team from University X, and the majority of the participants*

were ALP students."

I/P02.I02

"During the foundation program, ALP students from the University X campus represented us at the international level." I/P03.I03

These results were additionally corroborated by survey responses, particularly the item *'Throughout ALP, I was given opportunities and space to be actively involved in activities organized by the campus and student associations'* (Mean=4.64), which is considered high. This implies that the majority of ALP students participated in a diverse array of campus activities in addition to language acquisition. This engagement not only fostered leadership qualities but also acted as a catalyst for the realization of their full potential (Ibrahim & Mahbob, 2021). Table 4 provides a more comprehensive analysis of the survey results.

Table 4: Students Perspectives on Opportunities and Involvement in Organizations and Activites

No	Item	Mean	Interpretation	SD
1.	Throughout ALP, I was given opportunities and space to be actively involved in student organizational management.	4.55	High	0.84
2.	Throughout ALP, I was given opportunities and space to be actively involved in activities organized by the campus and student associations.	4.64	High	0.76
3.	ALP facilitated the development of my leadership values.	4.58	High	0.76
4.	ALP improved my collaborative skills.	4.68	High	0.62
5.	ALP fostered a sense of teamwork within me.	4.74	High	0.56
6.	Throughout ALP, my self-confidence increased as I participated in social activities.	4.68	High	0.67
7.	Co-curricular activities in ALP helped shape the person I am today.	4.72	High	0.57
	Average	4.66	High	0.68

Table 4 shows that students' opportunities and involvement in organizational and campus activities recorded a high overall mean score of 4.66 (SD = 0.68). Among all items, item 5, *"ALP fostered a sense of teamwork within me"* recorded the highest mean score of 4.74, indicating that teamwork was one of the strongest elements developed through the program. Item 2 also reflected a high level of agreement (mean=4.64), suggesting that students perceived the ALP as providing ample opportunities to participate in campus and association-led activities. Other related items, particularly items 3, 4, 6, and 7 also achieved high mean scores (ranging from 4.58 to 4.72), further demonstrating that the ALP effectively supported leadership development, collaborative skills, self-confidence, and overall personal growth. This finding was supported by the informants' perspectives, as demonstrated in the following interview excerpts: "*Being a leader in ALP has had an effect on me even at the Bachelor's level. I now help a lot with conducting college programs, even in my own department*."I/B21.FGD04.

In addition, the effectiveness of organizational management experiences in shaping students' leadership skills was also identified through the analysis of program-related documents, particularly project proposals examined in this study. For instance, the review of the proposal for the 'Poster and IT Workshop' organized by HABIBAT demonstrated students' leadership competence when they successfully secured sponsorship from RedOne, one of the telecommunications companies in Malaysia. This situation was further shared by one of the informants, as follows:

> *"Recently, we organized a Poster and IT Workshop program. Since we still need funds, we're looking for alternatives by seeking sponsorships. Alhamdulillah, we managed to get sponsorship from the RedOne company."I/C31.FGD06*

The qualitative findings were supported by survey results, which showed high mean scores for items related to students' involvement in leadership and organizational activities. The language program findings indicate that students gained not only cognitive benefits but also essential leadership values through active participation in student-led management (Rekan et al., 2025). The integration of academic and leadership elements, therefore, acts as a catalyst for holistic human capital development (Ibrahim & Mahbob, 2021), in line with the aims of the National Education Philosophy.

Religious Development and Spiritual Strengthening

Spirituality and religiosity constitute a core foundation for shaping balanced and well-rounded individuals. From an Islamic standpoint, graduates are expected not only to meet industry demands but also to fulfil their responsibilities as *khalifah*, particularly in upholding and promoting Islamic values within society (Yusoff et al., 2024). Consequently, educational institutions play a central role in supporting students' holistic spiritual and personal development.

Within this study, *usrah* (faith-based student circles) emerged as a key spiritual approach (Khusniyah et al., 2025) that contributes to nurturing holistic human capital among ALP students. Rooted in early Islamic da'wah practices and later strengthened by Hassan al-Banna's organizational efforts (Sopi & Jalil, 2022), *usrah* remains widely practiced in contemporary higher education. The findings further reveal that *usrah* activities occurred through both formal and informal platforms, facilitated by student initiatives and supported by lecturers. Formal implementation was reflected particularly through the Character Development Module (CDM), as described by one of the informants:

> *"We also had usrah sessions with our mentors through the CDM. If we wanted to hold an usrah, we could set the place and time. From my experience, some usrah activities were even conducted outside the classroom."I/A03.FGD01*

The findings highlight the adaptability of usrah as an effective medium for delivering religious values while providing meaningful opportunities for students to strengthen their moral and ethical virtues as Muslims. This approach contributes to the development of well-rounded human capital by integrating both spiritual and worldly dimensions (Kamarul Zaman et al., 2025). The study also shows that *usrah* reinforces Islamic understanding while incorporating elements of structured organizational management. This was evident through students' systematic preparation and coordination before conducting *usrah* sessions with their lecturers. The following excerpts further illustrate this practice: "*We prepared working papers, drafted invitation letters, and so on. So, through usrah, we also gained knowledge about organizational management*."I/A02.FGD01.

These results indicate that the practice of *usrah* during ALP not only conveyed religious messages but also provided a platform for the application of interpersonal skills (Abd Hamid et al., 2024). This finding was further reinforced by the statements of the informants, as follows:

> *"I think usrah is also one of the programs that helps us get better at our soft skills. We were given the chance to talk and discuss religious ideas in front of our friends. This, in turn, trained us to become da'wah practitioners who not only know how to share religious knowledge, but also possess the skills to manage an organization."I/B16.FGD03*

In addition, the involvement of lecturers in *usrah* activities served as a platform for fostering closer relationships and mutual understanding between lecturers and students. This was reflected in

the following finding "*For bonding, I think it was during CDM, the Personality Development Module. Through CDM, the lecturers got to know us more personally, and we also became closer to them*."I/A11.I06.

The implementation of *usrah* with the lecturers' guidance as *murabbi* (spiritual mentor) fostered a close and meaningful relationship between teachers and students through the concept of *al-Ṣuḥbah* (mentor-disciple companionship) (Mohammed Zabidi et al., 2020). This scenario aligns with al-Ghazali's assertion that educators should fulfil their roles as *murabbi* in nurturing and internalizing religious understanding among their students (al-Ghazali, 2002). The bond established between lecturers and students was found to leave a profound impact on the inculcation of religious and moral values within the students. This was further expressed by one of the informants, as follows:

> *"The ALP lecturers really like to give us religious advice and reprimands, even during class. This directly made me want to change and resolve to be a better Muslim and become like them one day." I/A06.FGD02*

Futhermore, an informal *usrah* sessions were also conducted through the HABIBAT, as described by one informant: "*One of the programs we carried out every week was HABIBAT usrah. These sessions were organized by the Religious and Spiritual Committee every Thursday evening*." I/A10.I05

Interactive and informative religious sharing sessions were found to attract students' interest and encourage their active participation in *usrah* activities (Abdul Ghani & Hashim, 2021). Indeed, this *da'wah* strategy aligns with al-Ghazali's recommendation that the process of developing human capital grounded in religious principles should strike a balance between spiritual inculcation and the nurturing of students' potential (al-Ghazali, 2002). Hence, *usrah* serves as one of the most effective techniques for promoting human development based on religious foundations. This was further expressed by one of the informants, as follows:

> *"In this usrah, besides learning religious knowledge, we can also sharpen our soft skills. This is because we will be the ones managing the content, sharing it in front, and planning suitable and engaging delivery methods according to our individual creativity." I/B16.FGD03*

Alongside *usrah,* religious studies conducted both within and outside the classroom also facilitated the spiritual development of students. *Tafaqquh Fiddin* (deepening religious understanding) courses were one such program that was offered on campus, as indicated by the following informants: "*Another program was Tafaqquh Fiddin classes, held twice a week after Maghrib in the hall. It was more of an informal way of learning religious knowledge*."I/A08.I03.

From these findings, the researcher identified a significant relationship between religious learning and *turath* studies (Islamic classical studies), which are rooted in the traditional *pondok* (Traditional Islamic boarding school) approach. In the context of religious education, the *pondok*-based method serves as an important medium for preserving the continuity of Islamic knowledge itself (Abd Latif et al., 2021). This perspective was also supported by the informants, who emphasized that for students in religious studies, *turath* learning should not be marginalized but rather prioritized as a central component of religious education. This was articulated by one of the informants in the following interview excerpt:

> *"I came to realize that, as students of religion, we must understand that studying through the pondok tradition is part of our heritage and cannot be separated from religious education. In pondok learning, we begin with basic texts before progressing to more complex ones." I/B14.FGD03*

These findings indicate that human capital development within the ALP program places strong emphasis on integrating spiritual and religious elements to strengthen students' resilience in navigating contemporary global challenges. This is supported by the high mean score for the item *'ALP helps strengthen the religious values within myself'* (Mean = 4.83), as well as the item *'Religious activities in ALP*

have helped shape the person I am today' (Mean = 4.71). Together, these results show that most ALP graduates acknowledged the program's significant role in shaping their personal and moral development in accordance with Islamic principles.

The findings further demonstrate that *usrah* plays a meaningful role in fostering human development while reinforcing *ukhuwwah Islamiyyah* (Ahmad, 2019). Complementary religious learning sessions, such as the evening *Tafaqquh Fiddin* classes, also deepened students' understanding of religious life through engagement with *turath* texts and exposure to traditional scholarly methods. These insights suggest that program administrators should continue developing proactive strategies to enhance students' spiritual and religious dimensions, particularly in addressing complex challenges in the modern era.

Local and Social Cultural Influences

Social factors are undeniably one of the most significant contributors to the process of human development (Md Sabil et al., 2021). Peers were identified as the most significant social influence on students during their ALP voyage in the context of this study. Peers are instrumental in the development of student personalities, as previously demonstrated in research (Bakar et al., 2024). This was further substantiated by the study's results, as articulated by a single informant:

> *"I feel that my friends have been very supportive here. In class, we always help and encourage one another. I used to be shy about speaking in front of the class, but now I have become more confident to speak and present. This situation has brought us closer together and has made our studies much easier."I/D33.FGD07*

The findings demonstrated that, in addition to being fellow learners, peer interactions significantly contributed to good personal growth, especially in fostering the development of students as individuals. The enhancement of communication skills, such as the ability to effectively present academic topics in front of the class was identified as one of the positive indicators that human capital formation within the classroom context was progressing appropriately. This discovery further corroborates earlier research indicating that peer influence might enhance students' creative involvement in classroom learning (Shi et al., 2025).

Moreover, the findings underscored that peer influence played a substantial role on student academic achievement throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Peers evidently played an encouraging role in preventing students from underperforming throughout online teaching and learning sessions. This situation was described by one of the study informants as follows:

> *"The challenge with online classes, right? Whether we liked it or not, we had to depend on ourselves and our friends. That's what mattered. Sometimes, when I needed notes, I asked friends who had written them down."I/D25.FGD05*

This scenario emphasizes the students' sense of accountability. They pursued initiatives and solutions with the assistance of their classmates, despite the obstacles of online learning. These results emphasize the critical role and potential of peer relationships in the establishment of an environment that influences the individual personality. Despite frequent criticisms of online learning regarding diminishing student discipline, rampant plagiarism, and restricted interaction between educators and learners (Rustim et al., 2022), this study's findings present a novel perspective in particular highlighting students' self-initiative and dedication to actively engage in their learning process.

Lecturers were also among the most significant contributors to the development of well-rounded students, in addition to colleagues. This assertion was corroborated by the subsequent interview excerpt:

> *"What I enjoyed most was that the lecturers here became our backbone. Since ALP emphasizes*

student-centered learning, such as presentations, the encouragement from lecturers helped me overcome my fear of speaking up. This increased my motivation to keep learning."I/A11.I06

This finding was further corroborated by interviews with lecturers themselves:

"During ALP, we consistently encouraged students to practice and apply Arabic not only in the classroom but also outside of it."I/E04.I04

These interview findings revealed that the program's lecturers did not only fulfil their roles as educators who encourage students' academic engagement, but also acted as facilitators in nurturing students' soft skills. This finding directly supports previous studies which outlined that teachers' involvement in classroom instruction exerts a significant psychological influence in integrating efforts toward academic excellence, while simultaneously shaping students' character development (Sava et al., 2020). This qualitative finding was further reinforced by the survey data, in which the item *'ALP lecturers encourage student participation in teaching and learning sessions'* (Mean=4.82). This outcome demonstrates that ALP lecturers actively endorse and facilitate student interaction within the classroom. Such an approach not only creates a conducive and effective learning environment, but also helps to reduce students' anxiety when encountering new learning materials (Rahman & Asmad, 2023; Rekan, et al., 2025). This was further echoed by one of the informants, as follows:

"I am very grateful that all the ALP lecturers are so supportive of us. As for myself, I've felt that Arabic is difficult from the very beginning. But when I started learning and the lecturer gave positive encouragement, I finally found it easy to learn and even liked Arabic more than before."I/B19.FGD04

Additionally, the ALP lecturers' characteristics also generated inspiration for the development of students' human capital. Che Hashim et al. (2023) discovered that competent lecturers with exemplary character had a beneficial effect on both the learning process and the personal development of students. One informant emphasized this:

"Overall, I feel that I take a lot of inspiration from Ustaz X as a role model from the way he manages his time to his teaching of Arabic. Since Ustaz X is Malay, but very fluent in Arabic, I look up to him as an example to follow."I/C30.FGD06

In the context of foreign language learning, the above findings clearly demonstrate that teachers exert a significant influence on students' language competence. This is consistent with previous research highlighting the positive impact of teachers on students' motivation to learn and master a language, particularly Arabic (Juryatinai & Amrin, 2021). These findings further affirm that students' language competence is not solely shaped by lecturers' teaching strategies, but also by their personalities and character. This was further supported by the following interview excerpts:

"This lecturer is a local, but was born in Mecca. So I became even more enthusiastic about learning, especially when I heard her teaching using Arabic. We become influenced to adopt her conversational style. This actually helps me learn Arabic more effectively. "I/C28.FGD06

Furthermore, ALP lecturers have been recognized for their attentiveness and empathy about the current situation and welfare of their students. Simple gestures such as checking in on students and showing concern for their circumstances indirectly contributed to creating a harmonious and safe learning environment (Amin, 2023). This was reflected in the following statements shared by the informants:

"Through the ALP program, I feel that I have become a better version of myself. One of the

> *contributing factors was the approach of my lecturers, who often checked on our well-being and academic progress. Sometimes, outside of class, they were open and willing to listen to the students' problems. " I/B19.FGD04*

This scenario clearly illustrates that, in addition to imparting knowledge, lecturers significantly influence the development of students' personalities and moral character. The findings indicated that lecturers in the program frequently delivered religious and moral guidance to their students. This was demonstrated in the subsequent interview excerpts:

> *"ALP lecturers, in class, they don't just teach. They also guide us spiritually. For example, Ustaz X likes to joke in class, but within his jokes, he intentionally included advice. So, even during lessons, there was personal development happening, whether we realized it or not. That's how I was able to improve myself and become a better person." I/C27.FGD06*

These findings further underscore the role of lecturers, which extends beyond merely serving as academic instructors. They also play a crucial part in shaping students' personal growth, ensuring that their development remains aligned with religious principles and values (Husein et al., 2022).

In addition to the campus community, the broader society also collectively contributed to the holistic development of ALP students. For example, the student-led programs were discovered to be supported by the surrounding community due to their generous contributions. An informant's account corroborated this: "*We sought funding in X. And alhamdulillah, companies in X and even the local community around the X campus were very generous and supportive in helping us organize programs*."I/B20.FGD04

Furthermore, the Sarawak Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) contributed to the facilitation of student association programs. This support was apparent in the financial contributions made to student activities, which indirectly facilitated the agenda of enhancing students' soft skills and leadership. This was emphasized in the interview excerpt that follows: "*We once reached out to JAIS regarding funding for the Mukhayyam Lughawi program. Alhamdulillah, they approved the application, which helped cover the program's expenses*." I/B21.FGD04.

These findings indicate that the roles of relevant authorities and stakeholders collectively contribute to the development of human capital at the higher education level. The support provided by the local community and social agencies, such as the Sarawak Islamic Religious Department (JAIS), not only facilitates the smooth implementation of student organizational activities through financial assistance, but also serves as a medium of social interaction that helps build long-term collaborative networks between educational institutions and social organizations (Baral, 2023; Manaf & Abdullah, 2021). This demonstrates that collective and integrated support from all stakeholders embodies an effective two-way collaborative approach, particularly in strengthening the agenda of human capital development.

Alongside individual and societal variables, the environmental context (*bī'ah*) has been acknowledged as a significant contributor to human development (Ismail et al., 2024). This was further supported by the survey item *'The campus environment helped shape who I am today'* which recorded a high mean score of 4.67. The interpretation of this result highlights the significant influence that the surrounding environment has on the formation of individuals (Mohd Arifin & Mat Teh, 2020).

The presence of a *bi'ah solehah* (righteous environment) was identified as a catalyst in the formation of Islamic-oriented human capital in the ALP context. The encircling community's religiously infused atmosphere was discovered to motivate students to develop into more virtuous individuals (Sulaiman et al., 2021). The subsequent informants concurred with this:

> *"I can say that ALP gave me a very meaningful experience in my life. One of the main reasons was the bi'ah there. I believe we all agree when I say that the environment in University X, was very different compared to school."I/A02.FGD01*

This perspective was additionally corroborated by survey results, particularly the items *'Throughout ALP, I experienced positive changes in my personal character'* and *'ALP has become the foundation of my character development today'* which achieved high mean scores of 4.71 and 4.66, respectively. This indicates that the ALP program serves not only as a language learning platform but also as a center for human capital development rooted in religious principles. Although the ALP centre originally based at Univesity X has since relocated to X, the same *bī'ah* (religious environment) continues to permeate the campus atmosphere. This was highlighted by one of the informants, who represented the first cohort of ALP students studying at the new campus, as follows: "*For me, alhamdulillah, the environment has kept us mindful, especially in terms of dress. Since we are in a religious environment, I feel well-guarded*." I/D32.FGD07.

In addition, the researcher found that the presence of a religiously conducive environment was largely attributed to the regular organization of religious gatherings and knowledge-sharing sessions attended by students. This indirectly provided added value to the students' holistic development, particularly by enriching the knowledge they had already acquired in formal classroom settings (Musa & Husin, 2020). This scenario was also mentioned by one of the informants, as follows: "*So, within that one year, we absorbed as much knowledge as we could from our lecturers, who are very knowledgeable, or by attending religious program in X every Friday morning*." I/B16.FGD03.

The informant's statement demonstrates that a learning environment that embodies Islamic values through majlis ilmu not only helps shape students' character and moral identity (Ibrahim, 2025), but also enhances their comprehension of the religious knowledge learned in class (Ismail et al., 2025). Students' participation in these gatherings provides meaningful experiences that integrate intellectual, spiritual, and social learning dimensions. The table below displays respondents' feedback that further reinforces the discussion within this theme.

Table 5: Respondents' Perspectives on Social and Environtmental Factors in Human Capital Development

No	Item	Mean	Interpretation	SD
1.	ALP lecturers encouraged student participation in teaching and learning sessions	4.82	High	0.44
2.	The campus environment helped shape who I am today.	4.67	High	0.67
3.	Throughout ALP, I experienced positive changes in my personal character	4.71	High	0.67
4.	ALP has become the foundation of my character development today'	4.66	High	0.63
	Average	4.71	High	0.60

Overall, this theme highlights the significant role of social and environmental factors grounded in religious values in supporting holistic human capital development at the higher education level. These factors positively influenced students' attitudes, character, and identity, as reflected in Table 5, where related items recorded a high mean score of 4.71. This suggests that a supportive social and cultural environment not only strengthens students' moral and spiritual dimensions but also enriches their intellectual and social development. The findings thus offer a useful reference for stakeholders responsible for implementing the language education program. They underscore the need to enhance integrated and balanced student development across cognitive, affective, and value-based domains, in line with broader efforts to nurture resilient and well-rounded human capital capable of adapting to contemporary challenges.

Challenges and Obstacles in the Development of Human Capital

Efforts to cultivate holistic human capital that aligns with both religious principles and contemporary needs are often constrained by several challenges. In addition to the influence of social media and shifting ideological trends (Zulkifli et al., 2022), financial limitations continue to hinder the optimal development of student potential (Sohar et al., 2024). Adequate financial resources are essential for sustaining student-focused programs, and constraints in this area directly affect their continuity and overall impact (Razman et al., 2025).

The findings of this study similarly reveal that financial constraints were a major obstacle in implementing planned student activities. Despite support from various stakeholders, the assistance received was insufficient to cover the full cost of program execution. This issue was underscored by a former President of the HABIBAT student association, who reported the cancellation of several initiatives due to inadequate funding. The following excerpt illustrates this experience: "*Even though we had the association and had planned many programs, when our funding or finances did not allow, we were forced to cancel certain activities and only retained the main ones*."I/A08.I03.

Despite the implementation of other efforts, including the imposition of annual membership fees for HABIBAT members, which included ALP and foundation students, the total revenue generated remained inadequate to cover the program's expenses for the entire academic session. This concern was shared by one of the informants as follows:

> *"Funds from membership fees were allocated directly to each committee according to the needs of their planned activities or programs. However, once divided among the committees, it was still insufficient to cover all of the association's activities."I/B20.FGD04*

To ease the financial burden faced by students, several suggestions were put forward by the informants, particularly regarding potential funding mechanisms to support the implementation of planned programs. Among the proposed suggestions was for the Sarawak Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) to establish a dedicated fund aimed at promoting the organization of programs centered on human capital and capacity development among ALP students. This was articulated by one of the informants, as follows:

> *"As I mentioned earlier, if JAIS were to provide a special allocation for ALP student activities, we could run many more programs. With more programs, we would have more opportunities to sharpen our soft skills."I/A08.I03*

These findings reaffirm that financial resources form the foundation for the effective implementation of student activities (Razman et al., 2025). Strengthening collaboration among relevant stakeholders can help reduce these financial barriers, enabling students to implement and sustain planned programs more efficiently.

The study also highlights that the post–Covid-19 transition period, beginning in late 2019, affected not only educational operations but also disrupted human capital development agendas globally (Hilmi & Shafiai, 2022). In this context, the pandemic resulted in the cancellation of numerous planned activities and required significant restructuring of student programs. This situation was described by one of the informants as follows: "*During the online learning period, I would say there were actually fewer programs like these.*" I/B25.FGD05.

Even during the post-pandemic phase, when campuses gradually reopened in the 2021/2022 academic session, the execution of student association programs particularly those organized by HABIBAT remained limited. Beyond the transition from pandemic to endemic status, the institution's relocation to a new campus that was not yet fully equipped further constrained activities. As a result, the ALP program had to be temporarily conducted at the main University X campus, requiring students to share facilities with the broader university community. This circumstance restricted the implementation of many planned initiatives. One informant described this experience as follows:

"*Honestly, HABIBAT in X had very few programs. There were many organizations there, and a lot of the facilities at Univesity X were not accessible to us*." I/C30.FGD06.

This situation significantly hindered efforts to nurture students' soft skills, despite the important role assigned to higher education institutions in this agenda as outlined in the National Education Policy 2017 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017). Although most planned programs could not be fully executed, the findings show that the student organization continued taking proactive steps to ensure that some activities particularly *usrah* sessions were conducted online. This was highlighted by one of the informants: "*Although most of the planned programs could not be carried out physically due to facility constraints, we still managed to conduct several others online, such as the HABIBAT usrah sessions*." I/C30.FGD06.

Despite these constraints, the findings reveal that HABIBAT leaders demonstrated strong initiative in seeking alternative solutions to ensure their programs continued. Their commitment reflects resilience and determination to sustain the human capital development agenda within the ALP program. This experience also provided valuable training for students to remain adaptable and resilient when facing future challenges (Hakim & Abidin, 2024). In line with this situation, challenges related to student empowerment continued even after the relocation to the new campus in X. This was shared by one of the informants as follows: "*That's right. At this new campus, we actually lacked programs*." I/D32.FGD07.

From these findings, the researcher identified that the limited number of programs during the first semester was due to the fact that the new X campus had only recently commenced operations in the 2023/2024 academic session. This was explained by one of the informants, as follows: "*I think it was probably because we were the first cohort at a brand-new campus. So, it took some time to adjust and organize the activities accordingly.*"I/D36.FGD07

Overall, the findings show that human capital development initiatives within the ALP continue to face several key challenges that require prompt attention from funding bodies and program administrators. Strengthening funding mechanisms through collaboration with student associations, industry partners, and relevant religious agencies is essential to ensure the sustainability of high-impact student activities. In terms of program coordination and facility needs, a more structured governance framework between university management and student organizations is necessary to prevent program overlap and minimize resource constraints. These combined efforts would support more sustainable and holistic student capacity-building initiatives. By enhancing financial stability and improving strategic governance, educational programs can function not only as centers for academic growth but also as platforms for empowerment and leadership development within the contemporary higher education landscape.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that holistic human capital development requires an integrated educational approach that encompasses moral, spiritual, social, and cognitive dimensions. Within this framework, the Arabic Language Program (ALP) was shown to contribute not only to students' linguistic competence but also to their leadership development, character formation, and moral identity. Participation in student-led organizations, institutional activities, and faith-based initiatives such as *usrah* provided meaningful platforms that strengthened students' self-leadership, ethical awareness, and sense of social responsibility. The findings highlight the important relationship between religious education, supportive learning environments, and the cultivation of value-oriented human capital.

Despite these strengths, the study identified several challenges, particularly financial constraints, limited facilities, and transitional difficulties that hindered the full realization of students' potential. These issues affect students' development across cognitive, affective, and moral domains. Addressing these challenges requires higher education institutions to integrate structured, value-based leadership modules within language curricula and to strengthen experiential learning opportunities. Sustained collaboration between university administrators, student organizations, and sponsoring agencies is essential to ensure effective program implementation and adequate financial support.

The findings reaffirm the relevance of integrating spiritual, moral, and humanistic values into curriculum design, especially in a higher education landscape increasingly shaped by globalization and digital change. An education model that prioritizes technical competence without ethical grounding risks producing graduates who lack integrity, moral judgment, and leadership capacity. Therefore, aligning academic knowledge with religious values and character formation is crucial for advancing Malaysia's National Education Philosophy and for nurturing graduates who embody self-leadership, resilience, empathy, and responsibility.

Overall, this study offers practical directions for strengthening human capital development through value-based educational strategies. By reinforcing governance structures, enhancing funding mechanisms, and embedding character-driven leadership principles, higher education institutions can better support the development of graduates who are intellectually capable, ethically grounded, and spiritually conscious, contributing to the well-being of society and the nation.

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