

Enhancing Students' Ethical Reasoning Through High-Impact Educational Practices: Evidence from an Ethics and Civilization Course

Julia Clifton^{1*}, Chong Siew Kian¹, Agnes Lim Siang Siew¹

Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0188>

Received: 25 March 2026; Accepted: 31 March 2026; Published: 15 April 2026

ABSTRACT

Ethics education in higher education is fundamental to developing students' ethical reasoning, social responsibility, and civic awareness, particularly within multicultural societies. This study examined the effectiveness of High-Impact Educational Practices (HIEPs) in enhancing students' ethical reasoning in an Ethics and Civilization course. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed involving 66 undergraduate students enrolled in the Appreciation of Ethics and Civilization course at a Malaysian public university. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire grounded in established theories of high-impact pedagogy and ethical reasoning. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and Pearson correlation analysis were conducted. The findings revealed high levels of student engagement with HIEPs ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.51$) and ethical reasoning ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.56$). A positive and statistically significant relationship was observed between engagement in HIEPs and ethical reasoning ($r = .58$, $p < .01$). These results indicate that student-centred pedagogical approaches, including collaborative learning, discussion-based activities, and authentic assessment, are associated with meaningful improvements in ethical reasoning. From a research and pedagogical perspective, the findings provide empirical support for the systematic integration of High-Impact Educational Practices into ethics curricula and highlight the role of high-impact instructional design in strengthening ethical learning outcomes within multicultural higher education contexts.

Keywords: Ethical reasoning; High-Impact Educational Practices; Ethics education; Civilization studies; Higher education; Student-centred learning

INTRODUCTION

Ethics education in higher education has gained renewed attention as universities face increasing expectations to produce graduates who are not only academically competent but also socially responsible and ethically grounded. In an era marked by rapid technological advancement, social complexity, and cultural diversity, higher education institutions are increasingly expected to nurture students' ethical awareness, civic-mindedness, and moral judgment. Contemporary higher education discourse emphasises that universities play a crucial role in developing graduates who are capable of making responsible ethical decisions and contributing positively to society (de Moraes Abrahão et al., 2024).

Research in higher education pedagogy suggests that ethical and moral competencies are most effectively developed through active and applied learning experiences rather than through passive content delivery. Learning environments that encourage discussion, reflection, and engagement with authentic problems provide students with opportunities to practise ethical reasoning in meaningful ways. Empirical studies have

demonstrated that instructional approaches involving discussion-based learning, collaborative activities, and authentic tasks support ethical decision-making and professional judgment (Tavani et al., 2024). Furthermore, recent reviews of ethics education indicate that pedagogical approaches such as case-based learning and collaborative projects are commonly employed to foster ethical reasoning, although their effectiveness depends on instructional design and assessment alignment (Wiese et al., 2025).

High-Impact Educational Practices (HIEPs), also known as High-Impact Practices (HIPs), have been widely recognised as pedagogical approaches that promote deep learning and meaningful student engagement. Kuh (2008) identified HIEPs as educational practices that require sustained student effort, meaningful interaction, and application of learning to real-world contexts. Subsequent research has shown that HIEPs are associated with enhanced critical thinking, integrative learning, and personal development across diverse student populations (Kuh et al., 2013). However, recent studies also highlight that implementing high-impact teaching practices presents practical challenges, underscoring the need for empirical evidence grounded in authentic classroom contexts (VanWyngaarden et al., 2024).

In Malaysia, the *Appreciation of Ethics and Civilization* course was introduced as a compulsory general studies subject to strengthen students' ethical awareness, civic responsibility, and appreciation of cultural diversity within the Malaysian mould. The course aims to equip students with ethical understanding and critical thinking skills necessary for navigating contemporary societal challenges. Empirical studies conducted in Malaysian higher education indicate that students generally perceive the course as meaningful and relevant (Mohd Zahid et al., 2022; Nazri Muslim, 2020). Nevertheless, existing research has largely focused on student perceptions rather than examining how specific pedagogical approaches contribute to ethical reasoning development.

To address this gap, the present study examines how High-Impact Educational Practices implemented in an Ethics and Civilization course enhance students' ethical reasoning. By providing empirical classroom-based evidence, this study contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning and offers practical insights for strengthening ethics and civilization education in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

High-Impact Educational Practices (HIEPs) have been widely recognised as pedagogical approaches that enhance meaningful student engagement and promote deep, transformative learning experiences in higher education. According to Kuh (2008), these practices are characterised by sustained student effort, purposeful interaction with peers and instructors, timely and constructive feedback, and structured opportunities for students to apply theoretical knowledge to authentic, real-world contexts. Examples of HIEPs include collaborative projects, service learning, undergraduate research, experiential learning, and reflective activities, all of which encourage active participation rather than passive reception of information. Through these elements, HIEPs support the development of higher order thinking skills while simultaneously enhancing students' motivation, sense of belonging, and responsibility for their own learning.

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates the effectiveness of HIEPs in improving a wide range of educational outcomes. Studies have shown that students who engage in HIEPs exhibit stronger critical and analytical thinking, improved integrative and reflective learning, and greater personal and social development compared to peers who primarily experience traditional lecture-based instruction (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Kuh et al., 2013). Moreover, HIEPs have been found to benefit diverse student populations, including those from underrepresented backgrounds, by narrowing achievement gaps and promoting equitable learning opportunities. Collectively, these findings highlight the role of HIEPs as powerful instructional strategies that not only enhance academic performance but also prepare students with transferable skills essential for ethical reasoning, lifelong learning, and active citizenship.

Recent scholarship continues to affirm the relevance of High-Impact Educational Practices (HIEPs) in contemporary higher education, particularly in addressing the evolving needs of students in dynamic learning environments. A thematic review by Soh (2024) identified collaborative learning, experiential learning, and

engaged learning as dominant high-impact strategies that contribute to meaningful learning outcomes. These approaches emphasise active participation, interaction, and reflection, allowing students to connect theoretical knowledge with practical application. By engaging students in authentic tasks and shared learning experiences, HIEPs support deeper understanding and sustained engagement, which are increasingly valued in outcome-oriented and student-centred educational frameworks.

Within the Malaysian higher education context, empirical evidence further supports the continued relevance of HIEPs. Rajanthran et al. (2023) reported that undergraduates perceived high-impact practices as engaging and beneficial to their overall learning experience, particularly in terms of motivation, skill development, and relevance to real-world contexts. Students highlighted the value of opportunities to collaborate with peers, apply knowledge beyond the classroom, and receive meaningful feedback from instructors. Collectively, these findings indicate that HIEPs remain pedagogically relevant across diverse educational settings and cultural contexts, reinforcing their role as effective instructional approaches for enhancing student learning and engagement.

Ethical reasoning is increasingly recognised as a core learning outcome in higher education, particularly in courses related to civic education and social responsibility. Ethical reasoning refers to the ability to identify ethical issues, evaluate alternative actions, justify decisions using ethical principles, and consider social consequences. The neo-Kohlbergian framework conceptualises ethical reasoning as a developmental process that can be enhanced through education involving dialogue, reflection, and moral problem-solving (Rest et al., 1999). Empirical studies have shown that ethical reasoning can be cultivated through educational experiences that engage students in moral dilemmas and reflective discussion (Narvaez, 2002; Thoma & Dong, 2014).

Recent empirical studies reinforce the importance of interactive and student-centred approaches in ethics education, particularly in supporting students' ethical awareness and moral development. Tavani et al. (2024) demonstrated that multimedia-supported learning environments can enhance students' ethical decision-making by providing realistic scenarios, visual cues, and opportunities for reflection that promote deeper cognitive engagement. Similarly, Martini et al. (2025) reported that cooperative learning approaches positively influenced students' ethical motivation and moral efficacy, as collaborative discussions and peer interactions encouraged the exchange of perspectives and ethical reasoning. Together, these studies suggest that active learning strategies are effective in strengthening students' ability to analyse ethical dilemmas and make informed moral judgments.

Despite the growing body of evidence supporting interactive pedagogies in ethics education, limited research has explicitly examined the role of High-Impact Educational Practices (HIEPs) in shaping ethical reasoning outcomes, particularly within Ethics and Civilization courses. This gap is especially evident in the Malaysian higher education context, where ethics education plays a central role in promoting social harmony and civic responsibility among students from diverse backgrounds. The lack of empirical studies focusing on HIEPs and ethical reasoning underscores the need for further investigation. Accordingly, the present study seeks to address this gap by examining the relationship between students' engagement with HIEPs and their ethical reasoning within Ethics and Civilization courses.

METHOD OF THE STUDY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between High-Impact Educational Practices and students' ethical reasoning.

Sampling Method and Participants

A purposive sampling method was employed in this study. The sample was deliberately selected to include students who were directly exposed to High-Impact Educational Practices within the context of ethics education. The participants consisted of 66 undergraduate students enrolled in the Appreciation of Ethics and Civilization course at a Malaysian public university. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate as the study aimed to

examine the effectiveness of specific pedagogical practices implemented within a particular course rather than to generalise findings to a broader population. Participation was voluntary, and ethical considerations, including anonymity and confidentiality, were strictly observed.

Instructional Context

The course incorporated collaborative group discussions, group-based written reports, video-based group assignments, and guided discussions on contemporary ethical issues. These instructional strategies were aligned with course learning outcomes emphasising ethical understanding and critical analysis.

Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed based on established theoretical and empirical foundations. The High-Impact Educational Practices scale was adapted from Kuh's (2008) framework and Kuh et al. (2013), focusing on collaborative learning, discussion-intensive activities, and authentic assessments. The Ethical Reasoning scale was developed based on the neo-Kohlbergian model (Rest et al., 1999) and subsequent research on ethical reasoning development (Narvaez, 2002; Thoma & Dong, 2014). All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Reliability and Normality

Cronbach's alpha values indicated good reliability for HIEPs ($\alpha = .88$) and Ethical Reasoning ($\alpha = .86$). Skewness and kurtosis values were within ± 2 , indicating acceptable normality.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis were conducted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The descriptive analysis indicated that students perceived a high level of engagement with the High Impact Educational Practices implemented in the Appreciation of Ethics and Civilization course. As presented in Table 1, the mean score for High Impact Educational Practices was high ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.51$), reflecting students' positive evaluation of the teaching and learning approaches adopted throughout the course. This finding suggests that instructional strategies aligned with High Impact Educational Practices, such as collaborative group work, structured discussions, reflective activities, and authentic forms of assessment, were not only present but were also experienced as meaningful and relevant by the majority of students. The high mean score indicates that students perceived these practices as actively involving them in the learning process rather than positioning them as passive recipients of information. Furthermore, the relatively small standard deviation demonstrates a consistent pattern of responses among students, indicating that perceptions of High Impact Educational Practice implementation were largely shared across the cohort. This consistency suggests that the instructional design and delivery of the course provided equitable learning experiences, with most students reporting similar levels of engagement regardless of individual differences. Students also reported a high level of ethical reasoning, as reflected in Table 1, with a mean score of 4.08 and a standard deviation of 0.56. This result suggests that students generally perceived themselves as having a strong capacity to recognise ethical issues and to engage thoughtfully with moral questions presented throughout the course. In particular, students indicated confidence in their ability to analyse ethical dilemmas from multiple perspectives, consider diverse viewpoints, and evaluate issues using relevant ethical values and principles. The relatively high mean score reflects positive self-perceptions of ethical awareness and reasoning skills that were nurtured through course activities and discussions. In addition, the moderate and relatively consistent standard deviation indicates that these perceptions were shared by most students, suggesting a common learning experience across the cohort. This consistency implies that the instructional strategies employed in the course supported ethical reasoning development in a systematic and inclusive manner.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of High-Impact Educational Practices and Ethical Reasoning (N = 66)

Variable	M	SD
High-Impact Educational Practices	4.12	0.51
Ethical Reasoning	4.08	0.56

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

To further examine whether students' engagement with High-Impact Educational Practices was meaningfully associated with their ethical reasoning outcomes, an inferential statistical analysis was conducted. Specifically, Pearson correlation analysis was employed to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between students' perceived engagement with High-Impact Educational Practices and their self-reported ethical reasoning. This analysis allowed for a more rigorous examination of the extent to which variations in instructional practices were related to differences in ethical reasoning outcomes among students. The results of this inferential analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Pearson Correlation Between High-Impact Educational Practices and Ethical Reasoning

Variable	1	2
1. High-Impact Educational Practices	-	
2. Ethical Reasoning	.58**	-

Note. $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

The findings provide strong empirical support for the effectiveness of High-Impact Educational Practices in enhancing students' ethical reasoning. In particular, student-centred instructional approaches were shown to create learning environments that actively engage students in ethical inquiry rather than passive content absorption. High levels of engagement observed in the study suggest that these pedagogical practices enable students to participate meaningfully in ethical discussions and reasoning processes, thereby supporting deeper cognitive and moral engagement with course content.

Collaborative learning and discussion-based activities emerged as especially influential in promoting ethical reasoning development. These approaches allowed students to interact with peers who hold diverse values, beliefs, and perspectives, creating opportunities for exposure to differing moral viewpoints. Through structured dialogue and peer interaction, students were encouraged to articulate their own ethical positions, critically examine alternative viewpoints, and engage in reasoned debate. Such interactions enhanced moral sensitivity and encouraged deeper reflection by requiring students to consider ethical issues from multiple social and cultural standpoints.

Moreover, group-based tasks and guided discussions facilitated reflective judgement by prompting students to question underlying assumptions and justify their ethical decisions. This process supported the development of higher-level ethical reasoning by moving students beyond surface-level moral interpretations toward more nuanced and context-sensitive evaluations. The ability to reassess ethical stances in response to alternative arguments reflects a progression toward more advanced forms of moral reasoning, which are essential outcomes of ethics education in higher education settings.

In addition, the use of authentic assessments played a crucial role in strengthening ethical reasoning outcomes. By requiring students to analyse real-world ethical issues and apply ethical principles to contemporary social and civic contexts, these assessments encouraged deeper ethical analysis and meaningful transfer of learning. Authentic tasks helped bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, enabling students to recognise the relevance of ethics beyond the classroom. Consistent with existing literature, the findings reinforce the view that ethical reasoning is more effectively developed through active and experiential learning

than through passive instructional methods. From a Malaysian higher education perspective, the results highlight the importance of intentional pedagogical design in achieving the objectives of the Appreciation of Ethics and Civilization course, particularly in developing ethically informed, socially responsible, and critically minded graduates.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of High Impact Educational Practices in enhancing students' ethical reasoning within an Ethics and Civilization course, with particular emphasis on the use of student-centred pedagogical strategies. The findings demonstrate a positive association between students' engagement with these instructional practices and their perceived ethical reasoning development. The results extend existing literature by providing context specific evidence that reinforces the value of active and experiential learning approaches in promoting ethical awareness, moral reflection, and informed judgement among undergraduate students. Despite limitations related to self-reported data and a single-course context, the findings offer valuable implications for educators and curriculum designers. The results suggest that well designed pedagogical strategies play a critical role in achieving the learning outcomes of ethics related courses, particularly those aimed at cultivating ethical reasoning and civic responsibility. Future research may adopt mixed methods designs to capture both quantitative trends and qualitative insights, or longitudinal approaches to examine changes in ethical reasoning over time and across academic programmes. In conclusion, High-Impact Educational Practices represent an effective pedagogical approach for strengthening ethics and civilization education and fostering ethically responsible graduates in higher education.

REFERENCES

1. Ashford-Rowe, K., Herrington, J., & Brown, C. (2014). Establishing the critical elements that determine authentic assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 39(2), 205–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2013.819566>
2. Boud, D., & Falchikov, N. (2006). Aligning assessment with long-term learning. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 31(4), 399–413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930600679050>
3. Brownell, J. E., & Swaner, L. E. (2010). Five high-impact practices: Research on learning outcomes, completion, and quality. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
4. de Moraes Abrahão, V., Vaquero-Diego, M., & Currás Móstoles, R. (2024). University social responsibility: The role of teachers. *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge*, 9(1), Article 100464. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jik.2024.100464>
5. Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (2009). An educational psychology success story: Social interdependence theory and cooperative learning. *Educational Researcher*, 38(5), 365–379. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X09339057>
6. Kuh, G. D. (2008). High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
7. Kuh, G. D., O'Donnell, K., & Reed, S. (2013). Ensuring quality and taking high-impact practices to scale. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
8. Martini, M., Cavenago, D., & Carminati, M. (2025). Can business ethics courses be effective? A quasi-experimental mixed-methods study of a cooperative-learning approach in higher education. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 202, 439–458. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-023-05528-6>
9. Mohd Zahid, E. S., Ahmad, N. A., Abdul Halim, I., & Ab Lateh, A. T. (2022). Students' perception of appreciation of ethics and civilization course at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Penang Branch. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 11(2), 877–889. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v11-i2/13447>
10. Narvaez, D. (2002). Does reading moral stories build character? *Educational Psychology Review*, 14(2), 155–171. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1014674621501>
11. Nazri Muslim. (2020). *Islam dan Melayu dalam Perlembagaan: Tiang seri hubungan etnik di Malaysia* (2nd ed.). Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

12. Rajanthran, S. K., Wider, W., Wong, L. S., Chan, C. K., & Maidin, S. S. (2023). Utilisation of high-impact educational practices to engage undergraduates: A preliminary case study. *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching*, 12(1), 35–45. <https://doi.org/10.5430/jct.v12n1p35>
13. Rest, J. R., Narvaez, D., Bebeau, M. J., & Thoma, S. J. (1999). *Postconventional moral thinking: A neo-Kohlbergian approach*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
14. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin. (2008). *Many ethnicities, many cultures, one nation: The Malaysian experience*. Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
15. Soh, N. S. M. (2024). *High-impact educational practices in higher education institutions: A thematic review*. Universiti Teknologi MARA.
16. Tavani, F. M., Manzoni, C., Castiglioni, C., & Sala, R. (2024). The effects of e-learning using educational multimedia on ethical decision-making and professionalism of nursing students. *BMC Nursing*, 23, Article 45. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-024-01361-7>
17. Thoma, S. J., & Dong, Y. (2014). The defining issues test of moral judgment development. *Behavioral Development Bulletin*, 19(3), 55–61. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0100582>
18. VanWyngaarden, K., Pelton, J. A., Martínez Oquendo, P., & Moore, C. (2024). High-impact teaching practices in higher education: Understanding barriers, concerns, and obstacles to adoption. *Trends in Higher Education*, 3(1), 105–121. <https://doi.org/10.3390/higheredu3010006>
19. Wiese, L. J., Patil, I., Schiff, D. S., & Magana, A. J. (2025). AI ethics education: A systematic literature review. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, 6, 100405. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2024.100405>