

## **Ethical Values and Commitment Towards Achieving Excellence: A Study on Public Boarding School Students In Malaysia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The boarding school is perceived to be a springboard for success. Public boarding school students in Malaysia are mostly selected based on outstanding academic performance and co-curricular achievements. They will eventually join higher learning institutions and be groomed as future leaders and employees. In today's competitive global arena, it is critical for leaders and employees to internalise good moral values and display commitment towards excellence to achieve organisational effectiveness and sustainability. Substantial studies on ethical values and employee commitment have been conducted from organisational behaviour perspectives. However, there are limited studies that link the importance of ethics with commitment towards excellence in a school environment, pertinent for leadership development. To address the gap, this study was conducted to assess the ethical level of students at three established public boarding schools in Malaysia. A structured questionnaire was developed to measure three universally accepted moral values: integrity, self-control and courage. The study also examined students' commitment towards striving for excellence. Correlation tests were conducted to investigate whether there was a significant relationship between ethical values and commitment to excellence. Overall, the results show that the boarding school students studied in this research possessed high self-control, moderately high courage and moderately high integrity. The students' overall commitment to excellence was high. The study also found a consistent and significant correlation between ethical values and students' level of commitment to strive for excellence. Higher levels of integrity, self-control and courage will lead to higher commitment to excellence.

### **ARTICLE INFO**

#### *Article history:*

Received: 22 February 2013

Accepted: 11 October 2013

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*Keywords:* Ethics, commitment, excellence, Malaysia, public boarding schools, integrity, self-control, courage

## INTRODUCTION

Public boarding school students in Malaysia are frequently identified based on their academic excellence and co-curricular involvement as future leaders, be it in the public or private sector. In Malaysia, the boarding school is perceived to be a good breeding ground for leaders of tomorrow. It is the springboard to success.

Islamic worldview recognises humans as special creations of God (Syed Othman Alhabshi & Aidit Hj. Ghazali, 1994). Humans differ from non-humans in that they are made in a balance and are directly informed of their role – to be leader of the universe. “Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: ‘I will create a vicegerent (i.e. *khalifah* or leader) on earth’ (*Al Quran, Al Baqarah*, 2:30). Human beings are therefore in a unique position to be guardian, according to Islamic teaching. They are endowed with the highest degree of self-conscience, intelligence and freewill to think sensibly and evaluate if their acts are morally right or wrong while fulfilling their desires and self-interests. They are good by choice and given inner control and are made to be accountable for all their actions. “We have indeed created man in the best of moulds” (*Al Quran, At Tin*, 95:4).

Aptly, humans have three main responsibilities: to make himself/herself good; to help others be good and to make the physical world good. One cannot preach goodness if he or she does not personally embody goodness. This is where the study of ethics becomes relevant as a field of knowledge to be studied and internalised

by rational, responsible and civilised human beings. Boarding school students are certainly potential university students who will, upon graduation, join the labour market as employees or employers, responsible for a nation’s economic growth, prosperity and well-being.

However, there have been diverse concerns on the decadence of moral values among the younger generations, especially Generation Y, those born between the year 1982 and 2000. The ethical problems of Generation Y are often highlighted, be it at home or the workplace. Much as parents have a primary role to ensure good ethics are taught to their children, those who have duly released their children to join boarding schools may have a limited role in the shaping process because of the physical separation. A child sent to a boarding school will be moulded by the school environment and the communication process of the school directly or indirectly. In line with this, research has in fact found that family communication and institutional communication (including the school) have a positive relationship with the emotional spiritual quotient (Nuredayu Omar *et al.*, 2007).

Bearing this in mind, the question is, how has the public boarding school environment developed students’ ethical values and level of commitment towards excellence, pertinent for effective leadership, since these schools are expected to shape future leaders? This issue has inspired researchers to conduct an exploratory study in three established fully residential public boarding

schools in Malaysia; two all-boys' schools and one all-girls' school. They are all under the supervision and directive of the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. They are also fully funded by the Government of Malaysia.

This paper reports part of the study findings with two main objectives:

1. To assess the students' ethical values from three dimensions: Self-control, Courage and Integrity
2. To investigate the relationship between these ethical values and students' commitment towards excellence

The following is a literature review on the differentiation between ethics and morality in human behaviour, the ethical values of Generation Y and the role of religion in the global environment followed by discussions on what constitutes one's commitment to excellence.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Ethics versus Morality in Human Behaviour*

Ethics can be described as a set of principles that contains behavioural codes to determine what is right or wrong (Khalidah *et al.*, 2012b). It also outlines the moral duties and obligations that any human being should practise. Abdullah and Mohamad Zainol Abidin (2011) view that ethics concerns itself with what is good or right in human interaction. It revolves around three central concepts: "self", "good" and "other." Ethics is also defined as a critical analysis of human acts to determine their rightness or wrongness in terms of two major criteria:

truth and justice (Mauro *et al.*, 1999). In conceptualising ethics as a field of study one rationalises what actions are right or wrong and assesses whether they are just or fair from different perspectives -- individual, organisational or societal levels.

Moral philosophers in their study of ethics differentiate between the concepts of ethics and morality, although a layman may see these two terms as being synonymous (Abdullah & Mohamad Zainol Abidin, 2011). The objective behind this distinction is to clarify certain arguments. Morality is concerned with the norms, values and beliefs embedded in social processes which define right or wrong for an individual or a community (Shaw, 2008). Ethics, in contrast, is the study of moral standards whose explicit purpose is to determine, as far as possible, whether a given moral standard or judgment based on that standard is more or less correct (Velaquez, 2006). This, therefore, demands analytical thought and application of reason to determine specific rules, principles or ethical theories that determine right or wrong for a given situation (Crane & Matten, 2007). These principles also include religious principles since all religions focus strongly on conduct, part of which involves moral instructions, values and commitments (Shaw, 2011; Khalidah *et al.*, 2012a). In addition, these rules and principles must give an account of the individual rights or one's entitlements and what is just or fair (Boatright, 2007). Certainly, the rights of others, be it humans or non-humans must be considered, much as an individual is equally interested to exercise

his or her own individual rights and self-interests as a natural inclination.

*Ethics, Generation Y and the Role of Religion in Today's Global Environment*

One of the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is the character building of Generation Y. While tremendous advancement has been made in information and communication technology, aptly, there has been serious concerns on the decadence of moral values among the younger generation, especially Generation Y, born between the years 1982 and 2000 (Farnsworth & Kliener, 2003; Freestone & Mitchell, 2004; Daily Express, 2004; Rusnah, 2005; VietnamNet Bridge, 2008; Srivasta, 2010; SnapComms, 2010; Khalidah *et al.*, 2010). Most students, be it at primary, secondary or tertiary level, today belong to the Generation Y group (Munusamy *et al.*, 2010). As numerous works have highlighted the deteriorating values of Generation Y, several factors have no doubt influenced the shaping of one's morality and ethical values. They include upbringing, the socialisation process (i.e. the behaviour of surrounding people), experience and critical reflections on those experiences and the explicit and implicit standards of culture (Shaw, 2011). These factors may generally be referred to as socio-cultural factors.

Although socio-cultural factors may have significant influence on the shaping of one's ethical values, they are also developed and internalised from religious principles and beliefs (Rusnah, 2005; Khalidah *et al.*, 2012b). For believers, religious knowledge,

rules and principles are the foundation of their ethical values. Some people do not believe that morality boils down to religion but rather, to a function of what a particular society happens to believe (Shaw, 2011). Some may even view that it is misleading and inappropriate to link morality with spirituality and religious beliefs since it may violate individual or human rights which promote freedom of choice of religion and the individual's privacy. After all, one's choice of religion is a negative right (i.e. free from other's interference) and is clearly stated in the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Boatright, 2009). In addition to these rational arguments, Shaw (2011) has convincingly argued that morality need not solely rest on religion although it is justified that religion involves not only a formal system of worship but also prescriptions of social relationships.

While we fully respect and partially agree to these "westernised", liberal, pluralistic and universalistic views on the role of religion in shaping one's ethical values, the point remains: a belief in religion and internalisation of the principles and teachings will shape one's character and values. Most religions have an ethical component. The Golden Rule of Life, "Do to others what you want others to do to you", is found in all religions. "Unfortunately, the international community has yet to recognise and appreciate the significance of this rule" (Chandra Muzaffar, 2005, p.2). According to Simon Blackburn in his book, *Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*, "For

many people, ethics is not only tied up with religion, but is completely settled by it. Such people do not think too much about ethics, because there is an authoritative code of instructions, a handbook of how to live.” (Blackburn, 2001, p.9).

Following these contentions and reiterating our last point, religion certainly plays a role in shaping one’s ethical values irrespective of religious differences and beliefs. However, Khalidah *et al.* (2009) finds that there is no significant difference in ethical values among students of different religious background and concludes that religion need not necessarily determine one’s good moral/ethical values. What matters most is the application and internalisation of religious knowledge in one’s life. Obviously, the extent of religious/ethical knowledge that one acquires as well as his or her interests to apply and internalise this knowledge in life remains a personal decision. The more the religious/ethical knowledge that one acquires and the higher the interest shown to apply and internalise this knowledge in life, the more likely this religious/ethical knowledge will shape an individual’s moral/ethical values. Ethical behaviour therefore rests upon one’s self-conscience, commitment and sincerity to do good deeds as a social responsibility under all circumstances; as a *khalifah* on Mother Earth (Khalidah *et al.*, 2012b).

As for the Malaysian community, the first principle of *Rukun Negara* (i.e. Belief in God) clearly reflects the importance of religion despite its multi-racial society and cultural diversity. The Malaysian education

system has continuously emphasised religious/ethics education in its curriculum. Islamic Studies and Moral Studies are compulsory subjects to be taken by all students, be it at primary, secondary or tertiary levels (Khalidah *et al.*, 2009). However, the issue remains whether religion is part and parcel of one’s way of life in this competitive and materialistic global environment, where it is increasingly seen in the light of a private matter by the West and even by some in the East nowadays.

#### *Commitment to Excellence*

Commitment is a noble moral value which reflects one’s attitude to persevering and achieving the best in life. Commitment may simply be defined as an attitude of people for deploying their total resources towards the achievement of certain goals. From this definition, we can learn some of the elements which lead to one’s commitment – commitment as an attitude; use of own resources to achieve goals assigned to an individual and goal orientation. A committed person not only works hard but is also smart enough to know his or her expected ultimate results. Without this knowledge, failure and mediocrity in the conduct of life are only to be expected.

From an Islamic perspective, commitment is *istiqamah* i.e. being straight and steadfast, continuously striving to accomplish duties and responsibilities including doing good deeds and avoiding evil acts (*Amar Makruf Nahi Mungkar*) as a *khalifah*. In several places, the Holy Quran lists fulfilment of one’s commitments

among the most important characteristics of a believer (<http://www.islamicperspectives.com/FinancialDealings.htm>). Believers are those who are faithful to their trusts and to their commitment; they are, to quote from the *Al Quran* by A. Yusuf Ali (1983), “*Those who faithfully observe their trusts and their covenant*” (*Al Quran, Al Mu’minun*, 23:8). One’s covenant will create obligations or commitments. Quoting another verse, “*Come not nigh (near) to the orphan’s property except to improve it, until he attains the age of full strength; and fulfil (every) engagement, for (every engagement will be enquired into) (on the day of reckoning)*” (*Al Quran, Al Isra’*, 17:34). These verses clearly remind a believer that fulfilling a commitment is important as an accountability for every commitment will be asked for on the Day of Judgment. In Islam, commitment thus covers all contexts and aspects of life, be it business or non-business, personal or collective situations, not to mention commitment towards excellence in whatever we do. Commitment i.e. *istiqamah* has also been listed as one of the values and ethical components in Islamic Management (Noorazah Kamri & Khairiah Salwa, 2004).

Much as commitment is referred to in Islamic ethics from various perspectives, conceptually, it is also widely deliberated in the study of management, which closely links it with employees’ motivation to strive for the best. It has also been discussed at length in the context of leadership development and organisational effectiveness (Covey, 2004). Certainly, commitment is a sub-character trait of a person of integrity and a

noble value of effective leaders (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2009; Noorazah Kamri & Khairiah Salwa, 2004). Committed people will mobilise their total resources beyond their normal dedication for achieving goals and responsibilities assigned to them. According to MacCarthy (1997), most employees give 60% of their time and attention to their jobs. This is sufficient to do what must be done in most cases but in order to be excellent, employees need to give 100% commitment. However, commitment to excellence may be due to rewards or achievements which are extrinsic and intrinsic. Commitment will lead to one’s sense of loyalty and perseverance to seeing the achievements of his or her dreams, ultimate goals and success in endeavour.

While Islam holistically looks at commitment as a virtue or rather an order of the Almighty to be followed by believers, contemporary studies on management in fact often link commitment and motivation with one’s needs and/or sense of purpose in life. Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory outlines five categories of needs that people seek to satisfy i.e. physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem and self-actualisation needs (Wang, 2001; Khalidah *et al.*, 2012b). Understanding what the different motivations are (toward the same end) is directly relevant to developing purpose as reflected by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.

To relate hierarchy of needs with motivation in an academic scenario, Liddell (2009) and Astin (2004) in fact highlighted that inculcating a sense of purpose and

meaning in life need to be embedded in college students so that they will not be individualistic (i.e. concentrating on fulfilling their self-interests) but be socially responsible to the community. When people have a sense of purpose in life and are motivated to fulfil certain needs, they will be more committed to achieving them.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research instrument*

A questionnaire was developed with two major sections: Section A with respondents' demographic details and Section B with Ethical Values and Students' Commitment to Excellence scales and items. Under Ethical Values, 26 ethics statements represented the three universally accepted moral values to be measured: Integrity, Self-control and Courage. The researchers adopted and adapted items from earlier studies by Khalidah *et al.* (2009, 2010, & 2012a) as well as studies by Gbadamosi (2004) and Yeung *et al.* (2006). New items related to the boarding school environment were developed based on the researchers' observation and experience as former boarding school students themselves. For the Commitment to Excellence scale, items were developed based on the factors influencing one's ethical values as stated by William Shaw (2011) with cross references made to relevant verses of the *Al Quran*. A 5-point Likert scale was used accordingly to gauge the respondents' level of agreement with the items on the questionnaire.

### *Research Dimension 1: Ethical Values*

Similar to other earlier studies by Khalidah *et al.*, this study too referred to Aristotle's Virtue Ethics Theory which recognises the need for one to emulate virtues such as honesty (a sub-trait of integrity), courage, self-control and respect for humans and non-humans to lead a rewarding life (Khalidah *et al.*, 2010). Virtue is a good moral value or character trait that manifests itself in habitual action (Boatright, 2007). For example, honesty cannot consist of telling the truth once; it is, rather, a trait of a person who consistently tells the truth as a general practice.

Based on Aristotle's Virtue Ethics Theory mentioned above, the ethical dimension is further classified into three sub-scales: Self-control, Integrity and Courage. These are universally accepted moral values to be internalised by humans irrespective of religious and cultural differences (Nickels, 2008; Khalidah *et al.*, 2012a).

### **Self-control**

Self-control refers to one's ability to control desires through the exertion of strong will power. A person of high self-control will always display patience and calmness and will strive to control his/her temper as anger is a bad moral value. He or she will consistently display emotional strength and stability when faced with uncertainties/tests in life. Self-control also refers to one's ability to avoid wrong doings and promote rightness of actions. In Islam, the foundation to self-control and good behaviour is *solat*

i.e. the obligation to pray five times a day. *Solat* in itself promotes one's commitment towards *amar makruf nahi mungkar* (i.e. doing good deeds and forbidding evil/avoiding bad behaviour).

### **Integrity**

Integrity is being upright and honest (Khalidah *et al.*, 2010). A person of integrity will always uphold good values and principles in life. A renowned Malaysian motivator, Dr. Danial Zainal Abidin has defined Integrity as *Taqwa* or piety, a quranic terminology for "God consciousness or fear to God". Apart from that, Donald Zauderer listed 13 specific behaviours that can help identify the level of integrity in individual actions (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2009). According to him, people of high integrity "possess humility, maintain the ability to be concerned about the greater good, be truthful, fulfil commitments, strive for fairness, take responsibility, have respect for individuals, celebrate the good fortune of others, develop others, reproach unjust acts, be forgiving, extend self to others and how people develop ethical behaviour -- they develop a sense of ethics everywhere they are in any situation" (Clement, 2005).

### **Courage**

Courage is the virtue of responding to fear with a reasonable amount of daring (Khalidah *et al.*, 2010). Courage is always associated with bravery and doing the right things despite the cost (Khalidah *et al.*, 2010). A person of courage normally has

commendable drive and will positively face the challenges of life with hope for a better future. He/she will take calculated risks and act with prudence. A courageous person will also not hesitate to uphold justice and fairness in all dealings, be it in private or public.

### *Research Dimension 2: Commitment to Excellence*

In developing the Commitment to Excellence scale, references were made on the factors influencing one's ethical values as stated by William Shaw (2011) as well as relevant verses of the *Al Quran*. For example, according to *Surah Al Mukminun (Al Quran, 23:1-10)*, commitment to excellence should not only be measured by the diligence with which one fulfils his/her personal needs but also by contribution to society at large. Therefore, taking from both conventional and Islamic perspectives, Commitment to Excellence items were developed for this study.

### *The Respondents of the Study*

This research was conducted in three long-established public boarding schools in Malaysia; two were all-boys' schools (later referred to as "Boys' School A" and "Boys' School B") and one was an all-girls' school. The respondents were Form 1 and Form 5 students. The two cohorts were chosen to assess whether there would be differences in responses considering the time factor/ students' duration of stay at the boarding schools.



*Pilot Study*

Following the development of the research instrument/questionnaire, a pilot study to assess its reliability was conducted at Boys' School A with the support of the school management. The questionnaire was distributed to 60 students; 30 Form 1 students and 30 Form 5 students. Based on the pilot study feedback, the questionnaire was translated into Bahasa Malaysia to assist the Form 1 students, who might find difficulties in completing it and to ensure the respondents had a proper understanding and correct interpretation of the stated items/statements.

Responses were sought from Form 1 and Form 5 students of the three schools in the research setting. The researchers chose these cohorts to cross-examine and make comparisons among these students to see whether there were differences in their responses. This is in view of the fact that the Form 1 students were newly exposed to the boarding school environment whereas the Form 5 students were in the final year of their five years in the school.

*Reliability and Data Analysis*

A reliability test was next conducted on the developed instrument. Cronbach's Alpha reliability tests were run for each scale (i.e. Students' Commitment to Excellence and Students' Ethical Values) and sub-scale (i.e. Integrity, Self-control and Courage). Within the scales, some of the statements were reverse coded to ensure that all the scales pointed in the same direction (i.e. a higher score always means a higher scale value). For the "Ethical Values" scale, the items were further grouped to represent three universally accepted moral values: Integrity, Self-control and Courage. Based on these analyses, 8 out of 26 ethics statements were excluded from further analysis to ensure reliability of the scales used. As indicated in Table 1, with alpha values of between 0.6 and 0.63, all the scales and sub-scales were reliable and could therefore be used as composite scales (Nunnally, 1978).

The researchers then proceeded with the full research study. Data collection was conducted from late January till March, 2011. Data were then coded and entered accordingly into SPSS Version 17. Descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, mean score and standard

TABLE 1  
Reliability of the Scales Used in the Study

Dimension	Scale	No. of items	Alpha
1	Students' Ethical Values		
	(i) Self-control	9	0.61
	(ii) Courage	3	0.63
	(iii) Integrity	6	0.61
2	Students' Commitment to Excellence	4	0.60

deviation were utilised to analyse the collected data. To test internal consistency of the scales used, Cronbach’s Alpha reliability tests were computed for each scale and sub-scale. Pearson’s correlation tests were utilised to investigate whether there was a significant relationship between Ethical Values (i.e. from three universally accepted moral values: Self-control, Integrity and Courage) and Commitment to Excellence.

*Demographic Details of the Respondents*

Referring to Table 2, out of 657 respondents, 33.6% were from Boys’ School A, 36.5% from Boys’ School B and 29.8% were from the Girls’ School. In other words, 70% of the respondents were males and 30% were females. Therefore, the smallest proportion

of respondents came from the Girls’ school. This is because two of the selected schools were all-boys’ schools.

As mentioned earlier, since this research had only included the Form 1 and Form 5 students at each boarding school, 47.7% of the respondents were 13 years of age (Form 1) while 52.5% of the respondents were 17 years of age (Form 5). All the three schools enrol only Bumiputera (indigenous group) students based on the policies set by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. All (100%) the respondents were Muslim and they belonged to the Malay ethnic group. They therefore embraced Islam as their religion. Of the respondents, 49.8% were brought up in the city whilst 30% and 19.6% were from small towns and rural areas respectively.

TABLE 2  
Demographic Characteristics

Number of respondents	657 (Boys’ School A: 221; Boys’ School B; 240; Girls’ School : 196)
Gender	Male – 70% Female –30%
Age	13 years (Form 1) :47.5% 17 years (Form 5) :52.5 %
Ethnicity	Malay – 100%
Religion	Muslim -100%
Place of upbringing	Rural: 19.6% Small town: 30% City: 49.8%
Raised by	Parents: 94.5% Father only: 0.3% Mother only: 3.8% Guardian: 0.9%
Income of parents	Below RM1500: 21.9% More than RM1500 but less than RM3000: 14.2% More than RM3000 but less than RM5000: 20.4% Above RM5000: 42.5%

\*Note that some data above are not reported as 100% because a few respondents did not fully complete the demographic section of the questionnaire.

In terms of upbringing, 94.5% of the respondents were raised by both parents, 0.3% by fathers only, 3.8% by mothers only and 0.9% by guardians. This finding seems to imply “family stability” for the majority of respondents. Next, from analysing the socio-economic status/background, it was found that 42.5% of the respondents came from above average income families (i.e. where the parents’ joint income was RM5000 and above) and 20.4% came from average income families (i.e. parents with joint income of more than RM3000 but less than RM5000). Another 14.2% had parents whose joint income was more than RM1500 but less than RM3000 and 21.9% with parents whose joint income was below RM1500.

To summarise, almost two thirds of the respondents came from middle and upper income families and a third of them came from low income/poor and hardcore poor families. (Note: The definition of

urban poverty is a household with an income of RM3000 and below). While these students are competing among themselves academically, the boarding schools are in fact supporting the government’s efforts to reduce income disparity between the rich and the poor to achieve national socio-economic balance.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Students’ Ethical Values: Self-control*

Table 3 suggests that in general, the students’ Self-control is high (Mean=4.05; SD=0.47). Most of the students always performed *solat* (obligation to pray five times every day), consistently read and internalised the teachings of the *Al Quran* and accepted failure as a challenge. This was a positive indication that these students did practise Islamic principles as part of their boarding school life and possessed the emotional strength to face the tests of life in all

TABLE 3  
Self-control (n=639)

NO	ITEM/STATEMENT	Mean	SD
1	I cheat under certain circumstances. •	3.23	1.20
2	I commit sins when I am alone. •	3.63	1.18
3	I turn to God when I am in trouble.	4.43	0.88
4	I always perform my daily prayers.	4.49	0.76
5	I always read and internalise the teachings of the Al-Quran.	4.09	0.84
6	Understanding the contents of the Al-Quran is the foundation of good ethics.	4.38	0.77
7	Sometimes, I pray less than five times a day. •	3.61	1.27
8	I accept failure as a challenge.	4.33	0.83
9	I remain calm and under control even when I am under stress.	3.47	1.08
SCALE MEAN SCORE		4.05	0.47

Note: Scale 1-5, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree  
The higher the score, the higher the ethical value level in terms of self- control.  
Reverse coded items are marked with •

situations. However, the moderate mean score for item 1 (i.e. “I cheat under certain circumstances) raises a moral concern. With a mean score of 3.23, students’ honesty and truthfulness certainly has room for improvement. Since cheating is a bad moral value, indicating lack of self-control, the students have to be duly reminded that cheating as a behaviour is morally wrong while being truthful in action is virtuous. Item 9, “I remain calm and under control even when I am under stress” (Mean: 3.47; SD=1.08) was also moderately rated; this is an indication that students’ self-control may be enhanced in the nurturing process.

*Students’ Ethical Values: Courage*

The overall finding in Table 4 seems to suggest that the students have moderately high *Courage* (Mean=3.82; SD=0.70) to speak the truth, act when they see injustice as well as follow college rules and regulations at their own initiative rather than being “imposed” or coerced to follow them. This is positive development of character. Courage is always associated with bravery and doing the right thing despite the cost (Khalidah *et al.*, 2010). A courageous person

will also not hesitate to uphold justice and fairness in his/her dealings in all situations. The students seem to display a high sense of confidence and bravery. This suggests that the schools have commendably succeeded in shaping courage in students.

*Students’ Ethical Values: Integrity*

The overall result in Table 5 seems to suggest that the students have moderately high Integrity (Mean=3.76; SD=0.62). They seem to appreciate the importance of honesty as indicated by the high mean score for item 3 (i.e. “It bothers me when I have to tell a lie”). They also strongly agree that the *Rukun Negara* principles which emphasise among others, belief in God, respect for humans and compliance with rules and regulations (i.e. the pertinent components of the Integrity value) must be understood and internalised. These are positive findings.

However, the lowest mean score of 3.09 (SD=0.86) for item 1, i.e. “I speak the truth at all times”, though moderately rated, raises a concern as being truthful is a virtue and character trait of people with high integrity as advocated by Donald Zauderer (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2009).

TABLE 4  
Courage (n=653)

NO	ITEM/STATEMENT	Mean	SD
1	I am confident to speak the truth.	3.88	0.90
2	I will take action if I see injustice.	3.77	0.85
3	I follow the college rules and regulations because I believe they are good for my character development and discipline.	3.82	1.03
SCALE MEAN SCORE		3.82	0.70

Note: Scale 1-5, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree  
The higher the score, the higher the ethical value level in terms of courage.

Being truthful in speech is also widely propagated by Islamic teachings as well as by all religions (Chandra Muzaffar, 2009). In fact, lying i.e. not telling the truth is a universally accepted bad moral value and one of the character traits of a *munafiq* (i.e. hypocrite).

#### *Students' Commitment to Excellence*

Table 6 shows that overall student commitment to excellence is high (Mean=4.49; SD=0.51), the highest score being item 3, "I perform my best to fulfil the expectations of my parents and family members". This seems to suggest that

the students' commitment to striving for excellence greatly depends on the moral support of parents and family members. Interestingly, item 2, "I strive to perform my best for my own satisfaction" seems to be rated lowest (Mean=4.26; SD=0.94). This also suggests that the students are committed to performing their best not solely for their own self-interests but for the interests of their family, the school and the nation at large. This finding seems to be consistent with the role of humans as *khalifah* (refer *Al Quran, Surah Al Mukminun, 23:1-10 & Surah Al Hujurat, 49:10*). We earlier noted that commitment

TABLE 5  
Integrity (n=644)

NO	ITEM/STATEMENT	Mean	SD
1	I speak the truth at all times.	3.09	0.86
2	The Rukun Negara must be understood and internalised by all Malaysian citizens.	4.41	0.79
3	It bothers me when I have to tell a lie.	4.08	1.09
4	There have been occasions when I took others' belongings without permission.	3.47	1.19
5	I believe that plagiarism (copying) is acceptable. •	3.63	1.21
6	I bully under certain circumstances. •	3.87	1.15
SCALE MEAN SCORE		3.76	0.62

Note: Scale 1-5, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree  
The higher the score, the higher the ethical value level in terms of integrity.  
Reverse coded items are marked with •

TABLE 6  
Commitment to Excellence (n=654)

NO	ITEM/STATEMENT	Mean	SD
1	I am committed to perform my best for the good name of the college/school.	4.49	0.72
2	I strive to perform my best for my own satisfaction.	4.26	0.94
3	I perform my best to fulfil the expectations of my parents and family members.	4.68	0.57
4	I am committed to performing my best for the nation.	4.41	0.76
SCALE MEAN SCORE		4.46	0.51

Note: Scale 1-5, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree  
The higher the score, the higher is the commitment for achieving excellence.

to excellence should not only be measured by fulfilment of personal needs and interests but also by one's contribution to society at large. These findings also imply that the students seem to have a high sense of purpose and meaning in life as advocated by Liddell (2009) and Astin (2004). This is a favourable observation and a commendable achievement for the schools. Boarding schools have successfully nurtured a strong sense of social responsibility and purpose in life among students as they strive for excellence in academia.

*Relationship between Ethical Values and Commitment to Excellence*

Based on Table 7, the values of Courage, Self-control and Integrity are significantly and consistently related to Commitment to Excellence. Therefore, a deduction could be made that higher courage, self-control and integrity will lead to students' higher commitment to excellence.

These findings are certainly consistent with the role of humans as *khalifah* on Mother Earth. In fact, they further support the fundamental Islamic concepts of *taqwa* (a Quranic term for piety), *iman* (a Quranic term for faith; a highly regarded religious ideal) and *ihsan* (benevolence; being kind and helpful) that should be possessed by all Muslims irrespective of biodiversity and cultural differences (Khalidah *et al.*, 2012c; Nor 'Azzah, & Khairiah Salwa, 2004). Considering that all the students are Muslims, the boarding schools in the research setting must therefore continue to nurture the ethical values of Courage, Self-control and Integrity as professed to Muslims to sustain their established reputable image in the education arena while they play their role in shaping future leaders for the global environment. Certainly, this requires a concerted effort from the school management and teachers, who must balance their academic roles with paternalism in the nurturing process.

TABLE 7  
Correlation Between Ethical Values and Commitment to Excellence

ETHICAL VALUE	CORRELATIONS	COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE
COURAGE	Correlation	0.29**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00
	N	650
SELF-CONTROL	Correlation	0.33**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00
	N	643
INTEGRITY	Correlation	0.21**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00
	N	642

Note: \*\* - Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## CONCLUSION

This study has found that boarding school students possess high Self-control, moderately high Courage and moderately high Integrity based on overall findings. These quantitative findings seem to support that the boarding schools in the research setting have played a commendable role in shaping students' ethical values in general. Interestingly, the study has also brought to surface some moral issues such as truthfulness that need to be duly addressed in the nurturing process.

The findings on the students' cheating behaviour under Self-control, and the act of not telling the truth (i.e. lying) under Integrity, seem to highlight that these two immoral acts (i.e. not telling the truth or lying and cheating) are complementary character traits. As the acts of cheating and lying are habitual character traits and not reflective of people with high integrity, it is doubly justified that the boarding schools must place special attention to enhance the students' Self-control and Integrity as these values are critical for leadership development. This can be done through spirituality programmes and initiatives embedded in the shaping process. This is also pertinent considering the students' physical separation from their parents' guidance and supervision while they are in boarding schools. The students must consciously realise that such behaviour is morally wrong and unethical. Certainly, it would be worrisome if these acts became part of the challenge posed by boarding school culture even though they may be seen

as acts of "desperation" in the "survival of the fittest."

The study has also found that there is consistent and significant correlation between students' ethical values and commitment to excellence. This suggests that Courage, Self-control and Integrity will lead to boarding school students' Commitment to Excellence. The higher the level of the students' Courage, Self-control and Integrity, the higher will be their Commitment to Excellence. Considering the direct relationship between ethical values and students' commitment to excellence, we strongly propose for the schools to double their efforts to enhance students' internalisation of virtues/Islamic ethics through spirituality programmes and initiatives, much as emphasis is duly given to students' academic achievements and co-curricular activities.

Although this study has limitations with its focus on public boarding schools, it has opened to more potential future research in different settings, such as normal daily schools and also other contributing demographic factors such as gender, family background etc. Future studies may investigate whether students' socio-economic background/differences has an influence on their ethical values and commitment to excellence.

This study may be useful as a reference to enhance the Malaysian boarding school system in particular, as boarding schools play a significant role in developing future leaders. This study also supports the concept of sustainable development from a social perspective (Crane & Matten, 2007). In

order to ensure continuous survival and success in this competitive global era, organisations, be they public or private, require ethical and committed leaders who are not only academically qualified but who possess good ethical values, respect human rights and promote social justice. For Malaysia, with its unique multicultural environment, this is critical as the nation adopts the 1Malaysia Concept to realise Vision 2020- to be a developed and civilised nation with the stewardship of ethical leaders.

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