



## Indonesia's national identity: Students, character education, and national challenges

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**Abstract:** This study investigates how students at Universitas Buana Perjuangan Karawang comprehend and internalise Indonesian national identity amidst the pervasive challenges of globalisation and modernisation. In higher education, students are expected not only to master academic competencies but also to cultivate robust moral character as future custodians of the nation. Consequently, this research aims to analyse students' conceptualisation of national identity, evaluate the implementation of character education within campus life, and explore the contemporary socio-cultural challenges confronting the younger generation. Employing a qualitative methodology, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and a comprehensive literature review. The findings reveal that students possess nuanced understandings of national identity, predominantly conceptualising it in terms of the core values of Pancasila, diversity, and mutual cooperation. Furthermore, the implementation of character education demonstrates positive outcomes when integrated into extracurricular activities, student organisations, and community service programmes. Nevertheless, substantial challenges persist, primarily driven by foreign cultural hegemony, rising individualism, and identity crises exacerbated by the digital era. Ultimately, this study recommends reinforcing character education grounded in local wisdom, revitalising Pancasila values within the curriculum, and promoting digital literacy that aligns with the Indonesian national character.

**Keywords:** Character Education; Globalisation; National Identity

## Introduction

Indonesia, as an archipelagic nation with diverse ethnicities, cultures, and religions, faces unique challenges in maintaining its national identity amidst the relentless forces of globalisation. National identity constitutes a collective identity that distinguishes Indonesia from other nations, formed through a lengthy historical process and crystallised in the values of Pancasila.

In the era of globalisation, characterised by advances in information and communication technology, geographical boundaries have become increasingly blurred, enabling the massive penetration of foreign cultures into Indonesian society. The accelerated cultural flows described by Appadurai (1996) have created what he termed 'mediascapes' and 'ethnoscapes' that complicate the maintenance of coherent national identities, particularly among youth who are most susceptible to such influences.

University students, as agents of change and young intellectuals, play a strategic role in preserving and developing national identity. They are in a transitional phase from adolescence to adulthood—what Arnett (2006) identifies as 'emerging adulthood'—where the formation of personal and group identity becomes crucial. This developmental phase is particularly sensitive to identity negotiation between traditional values and modern cosmopolitan influences. However, reality shows that many students experience identity crises, oscillating between traditional values and modernity, between Indonesian identity and cosmopolitanism. Research by Suyanto et al. (2022) on pseudo-radicalism among Indonesian university students confirms that young people in higher education face significant ideological pressures that challenge their sense of national belonging and collective identity.

Character education has emerged as a strategic solution for building national identity among university students. Lickona (1992) emphasises that character education is not merely the transmission of moral knowledge but the formation of good habits that are internalised into one's personality. In Indonesia, character education has become a national priority integrated into the education system through the Strengthening Character Education (Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter/PPK) policy. However, its implementation still faces various obstacles. The integration of Pancasila values into character education represents a distinct Indonesian approach that bridges universal civic virtues with particular national and cultural identities (Latif, 2012).

Various previous studies have examined aspects related to national identity and character education in the Indonesian context. Hidayati et al. (2020) found that local wisdom-based character education in higher education settings can be effectively implemented by integrating values into courses, internalising positive values through habituation, and fostering character-conducive campus environments. Their study of Samin community values in higher education demonstrated how indigenous cultural wisdom can serve as a pedagogical resource for character formation. Meanwhile, Sakti et al. (2024) emphasise the importance of ethnopedagogy in revitalising local wisdom within character education, showing that ethnopedagogical approaches can reshape societal dynamics by preserving cultural values and reinforcing multicultural national identity.

The relationship between civic education and national identity formation has been extensively studied in international contexts. Banks (2017) argues that effective transformative civic education must address "failed citizenship" by engaging students not merely as observers of civic life but as active agents capable of challenging structural injustices. His framework of transformative citizenship—moving beyond personally responsible and participatory citizenship toward justice-oriented engagement—offers important theoretical grounding for examining how Indonesian students conceptualise

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and enact their national identity. Similarly, Westheimer & Kahne's (2004) typology of citizenship education distinguishes between personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented citizens, a distinction relevant to understanding how character education shapes students' civic orientations.

However, existing studies have not yet explored in depth how students in regional industrial areas, particularly in Karawang, understand and implement national identity in their daily lives. Karawang, one of West Java's industrial centres, faces unique social dynamics, marked by the convergence of local Sundanese culture, migration from various regions, and the influence of global industry. This socio-cultural complexity creates a distinctive context for studying how students navigate competing cultural influences while maintaining their national identity.

Based on this background, this research aims to: (1) analyse the understanding of Universitas Buana Perjuangan Karawang students regarding Indonesian national identity; (2) identify the implementation of character education in shaping national identity within the campus environment; and (3) explore national challenges faced by students in maintaining national identity in the era of globalisation.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with an instrumental case study design (Stake, 2005). This approach was selected to obtain an in-depth understanding of national identity within the specific context of students at Universitas Buana Perjuangan Karawang. The instrumental case study design enables researchers not only to describe the case but also to utilise it as an instrument for understanding broader issues concerning national identity and character education in Indonesia. Qualitative case study methodology is particularly appropriate for investigating how students construct meaning from their experiences of national identity, as it enables the researcher to capture the phenomenon's complexity, context, and depth.

The research site is Universitas Buana Perjuangan Karawang, which was purposively selected based on the following considerations: (1) it is a private university with a strong institutional commitment to character education; (2) its location in an industrial area characterized by demographic diversity, with students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds; and (3) the presence of programs specifically focused on strengthening national identity, including mandatory Pancasila Education and Civic Education courses.

Research participants consisted of 12 students selected through purposive sampling, ensuring diversity in terms of academic major, gender, organisational involvement, and socio-cultural background. Additional data were gathered from 4 lecturers and 2 academic administrators who provided institutional perspectives on the implementation of character education. Data collection utilised methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2017), comprising: (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted individually with each participant; (2) participant observation in classroom settings, student organisation meetings, and community service activities; and (3) document analysis including institutional policies, course syllabi, and student organisation records.

Data analysis followed the reflexive thematic analysis procedures developed by Braun & Clarke (2019), comprising six stages: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; (2) initial coding to identify units of meaning; (3) theme generation by grouping patterned codes; (4) theme review to ensure internal coherence and external validity; (5) theme definition and naming with clear conceptual distinctions; and (6) report writing with representative quotation illustrations. Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis is distinguished by its emphasis on the researcher's active role in the analytical process, acknowledging that themes are

constructed rather than discovered in data.

## Findings and Discussion

### Students' Understanding of Indonesian National Identity

In-depth interviews with 12 participants revealed that students' understanding of Indonesian national identity is multidimensional and contextual. This finding aligns with Hall (2019) perspective that identity is not fixed or essential, but rather is formed through a process of negotiation between individuals and their sociocultural context. Hall's conception of identity as a "production" that is "never complete, always in process" resonates strongly with how the research participants articulated their sense of national belonging—as something they actively engaged with, rather than passively received. This dynamic understanding of national identity reflects what scholars working within postcolonial traditions have characterised as the inherently hybrid and contested nature of identity in post-independence societies of the Global South.

The dominant theme that emerged was the understanding of national identity in terms of Pancasila values. Ten out of twelve participants explicitly identified Pancasila as the core of national identity. A Pancasila and Civic Education student stated:

*"National identity is Pancasila, because that is our ideology. All values of national and state life are contained within it. Divinity, humanity, unity, democracy, and justice. If we hold firmly to these, we will not lose our identity as the Indonesian nation."*

This understanding demonstrates that the Pancasila education students receive has formed a cognitive framework for national identity. What is particularly significant is how students interpret Pancasila values within the context of their contemporary lives—not merely as memorised principles but as frameworks for engaging with current issues such as religious tolerance, democracy, and social justice. This aligns with Latif's (2012) argument that Pancasila represents not merely a state ideology but a living philosophical synthesis of Indonesia's diverse cultural and spiritual traditions. The students' capacity to connect Pancasila principles with contemporary challenges suggests a form of civic learning that transcends mere doctrinal transmission.

The second prominent theme was diversity (*kebhinekaan*) as a distinctive characteristic of Indonesia. Students interpreted national identity as the ability to live harmoniously within diversity. Direct experience interacting with peers from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds formed an experiential understanding of diversity. This finding reinforces Banks' (2017) argument that effective transformative civic education is not only about knowledge of diversity but also about concrete experience interacting with those who are different. Banks emphasises that democratic citizenship in multicultural societies requires what he calls "transformative citizenship"—the capacity to critically analyse social structures and work toward greater equity and justice, rather than merely tolerating or celebrating difference. The students' lived experience of diversity within the university setting thus constitutes an important informal curriculum for civic character development.

The third theme was *gotong royong* (cooperation) as an Indonesian social value. Participants identified *gotong royong*, cooperation, and social solidarity as fundamental components of national identity, often contrasting these values with the individualism they perceived in Western culture. However, students also recognised that the value of *gotong royong* faces significant challenges from individualistic urban lifestyles. They observed contradictions between the ideal of *gotong royong* and daily life practices, particularly in major cities. This reflects what Giddens (2020) termed the duality of structure, wherein individuals are simultaneously shaped by and shape social structures. The tension between collectivist traditional values and individualistic

modern lifestyles represents a central dynamic in the identity negotiation of contemporary Indonesian youth.

An important additional finding concerned the difference in understanding between students who were active in student organisations and those who were not. Active students tended to articulate more complex and politically engaged understandings of national identity, connecting it with national and even global issues such as democratic governance, social justice, and environmental sustainability. Meanwhile, less organizationally active students tended to provide simpler, more conventional responses focused on the symbols and rituals of nationalism. This gap indicates the importance of discursive spaces and participatory experience in the formation of critical national identity (Habermas & Burger, 1991). It also underscores Westheimer & Kahne's (2004) insight that different civic education approaches produce different types of citizens, with participatory and organisational experience fostering more sophisticated civic orientations.

### **Implementation of Character Education at Universitas Buana Perjuangan Karawang**

Observations and document analysis indicate that Universitas Buana Perjuangan Karawang demonstrates a strong institutional commitment to character education. This is reflected in the university's vision, which emphasises the development of graduates with strong character and integrity who embody Pancasila values. Character education is implemented through three main pathways: intracurricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular.

The intracurricular pathway includes mandatory courses such as Pancasila Education, Civic Education, and National Identity. Students acknowledged that these courses provide foundational knowledge of national values. However, they also criticised teaching approaches that sometimes remain doctrinaire and insufficiently dialogical. One student expressed:

*"The Pancasila course is important, but sometimes the teaching method is monotonous. There is more memorisation than discussion. However, we need space to ask questions, debate, and understand the relevance of Pancasila to our current lives."*

This critique aligns with Freire's (1970) foundational argument against the "banking" model of education, which treats students as passive receptacles of predetermined knowledge rather than critical subjects capable of transforming their own reality. For effective character education, pedagogical transformation is necessary—one that positions students as active subjects in the construction of moral knowledge. This pedagogical tension between transmission-oriented and dialogical approaches to civic education has been widely documented in international literature (Banks, 2017; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), suggesting that Indonesian civic education faces challenges common to civic education globally, even as it operates within a distinctive national-ideological framework.

Hidayati et al. (2020) similarly found in their study of local wisdom-based character education in Indonesian higher education that the most effective approaches combine formal course instruction with habituation, practical experience, and the creation of a characterised campus culture. Their findings support the need to move beyond content transmission toward more experiential and context-embedded forms of character education, particularly those that draw on local cultural wisdom as pedagogical resources.

The co-curricular pathway is evident in various academic activities integrated with character development, such as group work, presentations, and research. Students learn the values of academic honesty, responsibility, cooperation, and respect for differing

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opinions. Lecturers serve as character models through daily interactions with students—a dimension of character education that Bandura (1977) identified as social learning through observation and modelling. One student recounted:

*"There is a lecturer who truly inspires us. He not only teaches theory but also demonstrates how to be an intellectual with integrity. When a student cheats, he does not immediately punish them but invites them to talk, explaining the importance of honesty."*

This testimony illustrates the importance of exemplary behaviour (*keteladanan*) in character education—a principle deeply rooted in both Islamic educational traditions and progressive Western pedagogy. The concept of *keteladanan* resonates with Bandura's social learning theory in emphasising that individuals develop their moral character largely through observation and modelling of significant others. In the Indonesian context, the role of the teacher as a moral exemplar (*uswah*) is particularly emphasised in Islamic educational philosophy, connecting character education to broader religious and cultural traditions.

The extracurricular pathway is the most dynamic space for implementing character education. Student organisations such as the Student Executive Board (Badan Eksekutif Mahasiswa), Student Activity Units, and the LDKK Program involving the Indonesian National Armed Forces serve as social laboratories where students learn leadership, democracy, conflict management, and cooperation. Observations of organisational meetings revealed deliberative processes in which students debate, argue, and ultimately reach consensus—what Habermas & Burger (1991) would recognise as communicative rationality in action.

Community service programs constitute a particularly important vehicle for experiential character education. Students involved in activities such as teaching children in remote areas, assisting disaster victims in the Karangligar area of Karawang Regency, or conducting social services reported transformative experiences that deepened their empathy and social solidarity. A student who participated in a village teaching program shared:

*"After teaching in the village, I became more appreciative of what I have. I also realised that as a student, I have a responsibility to help the less fortunate. That experience changed my perspective on life and the meaning of being part of the Indonesian nation."*

This testimony illustrates the transformative potential of community-engaged learning as a character education strategy. Direct experience engaging with social reality provides more meaningful learning compared to mere classroom discussion. This finding aligns with Kolb (2015) experiential learning theory, which emphasises the importance of concrete experience in the learning cycle, followed by reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. The community service experience has catalysed precisely the kind of reflective-transformative cycle that Kolb's model describes, connecting personal experience with broader social consciousness.

Sakti et al. (2024) demonstrated that ethnopedagogy-based approaches that revitalise local wisdom in character education can reshape students' cultural identity and strengthen their sense of national belonging. Their findings from a Yogyakarta case study suggest that integrating local cultural values—particularly through living cultural practices rather than merely textbook knowledge—produces more authentic and lasting character formation. This insight has direct implications for character education at Universitas Buana Perjuangan Karawang, where local Sundanese cultural values could be more intentionally integrated into character education programs.

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However, implementing character education also faces several systemic challenges. *First*, a gap remains between formal institutional policies and field practices. Some students reported inconsistencies between the values taught in character education programs and the campus bureaucratic reality, which is sometimes opaque or inadequately responsive to student concerns. This gap undermines the credibility of institutional character education efforts. *Second*, character education evaluation remains unsystematic—the university has not developed valid and reliable instruments to assess students' character development over time, making it difficult to demonstrate the impact of character education programs. *Third*, insufficient synergy among various character education programs creates an impression of fragmented implementation without coherent coordination or cumulative developmental intentionality.

### **National Challenges in the Era of Globalisation and Digitalisation**

Students identified various challenges they face in maintaining national identity amid globalisation and digital transformation. These challenges can be categorised into three main groups: foreign cultural penetration, lifestyle individualisation, and value disorientation in digital spaces. Together, these challenges reflect what scholars have identified as the distinctive pressures facing youth identity formation in the contemporary era of accelerated globalisation (Appadurai, 1996; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Foreign cultural penetration, particularly Korean popular culture (K-Pop), Western culture (Hollywood), and Japanese culture (anime), is highly pervasive among students. All participants acknowledged consuming foreign cultural content through streaming platforms such as Netflix, YouTube, and Spotify. A female student admitted:

*"I am a K-Pop fan. Almost every day I listen to Korean songs and watch Korean dramas. I even study the Korean language. Sometimes I feel more connected to Korean culture than my own. This actually makes me feel conflicted."*

This phenomenon reflects what Appadurai (1996) termed cultural flows in globalisation, where culture is no longer confined to geographical boundaries. The Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) has become one of the most prominent examples of transnational cultural flow in Southeast Asia, creating complex dynamics of cultural hybridisation and identity negotiation among Indonesian youth. Importantly, however, students demonstrated reflective awareness of this dilemma—they do not entirely reject foreign culture but attempt to maintain appreciation for Indonesian culture. Several students were active in traditional arts communities, such as *angklung*, Sundanese dance, or *pencak silat*, as a form of cultural resistance, demonstrating students' agency in negotiating their identity amid globalisation (Robertson, 2020). This selective engagement with foreign culture, combined with conscious efforts to preserve indigenous cultural practices, represents what Robertson terms 'glocalisation'—the adaptation of global cultural flows to local conditions and identities.

The second challenge is lifestyle individualisation. Students observed a shift from traditional collectivist orientation toward modern individualism, experiencing what Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) identify as the "institutionalised individualism" of late modernity. Values such as *gotong royong*, concern for neighbours, and social solidarity are perceived as increasingly fading, replaced by competitive and self-centred mentalities. One student expressed concern:

*"Now people think more about themselves. On social media, everyone competes to show off a perfect life. Few want to care about social problems. During disasters, people are busier taking selfies than helping. This is far from the gotong royong value that is supposedly our identity."*

This individualisation is a consequence of modernity, which emphasises individual autonomy, social mobility, and personal achievement (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

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In modern society, individuals are no longer bound to traditional communities and can form their own identities. However, this freedom also presents what (Giddens, 2020) terms 'ontological insecurity'—anxiety about one's place in a rapidly changing social world. The tension between collectivist values embedded in Indonesian national identity and the individualising pressures of modern consumer culture represents one of the most fundamental challenges facing character education in contemporary Indonesia.

The third and most complex challenge is value disorientation in digital spaces. Social media has become the primary arena where students express themselves, interact, and consume information. However, digital spaces are also fraught with challenges: hoaxes, hate speech, cyberbullying, radicalism, and political polarisation. Students admitted difficulty distinguishing valid from invalid information and reported vulnerability to exposure to damaging content.

One serious issue is the prevalence of intolerance and radicalism on social media. Suyanto et al. (2022) documented a phenomenon they term "pseudo-radicalism" among educated Indonesian youth—students who have been exposed to radical ideologies through digital channels without necessarily committing to violence, but whose exposure creates concerning vulnerabilities in their national identity and civic commitments. Several students in the present study reported frequently encountering content promoting hatred toward particular religious, ethnic, or political groups. One student recounted their experience:

*"In my high school alumni WhatsApp group, messages that target certain religious groups often circulate. Some say this is not an Islamic state, others say it is an Islamic state. They attack each other with verses or religious arguments. I become confused—where is Bhinneka Tunggal Ika? Where is Pancasila?"*

This phenomenon reflects the fragmentation of digital public spaces where individuals tend to exist within filter bubbles or echo chambers that reinforce their biases and prejudices (Sunstein, 2017). Social media algorithms that prioritise content aligned with user preferences actually exacerbate polarisation and create conditions of 'enclave deliberation' in which citizens are only exposed to perspectives that confirm their existing views. This algorithmic structuring of information environments poses fundamental challenges to the kind of pluralistic civic discourse that Habermas (2015) argues is essential for democratic legitimacy, and that character education programs aspire to cultivate.

Students also face challenges in maintaining ethical integrity in the digital world. Students acknowledged plagiarism, the dissemination of unverified content, and other unethical digital behaviours as significant issues. They recognised a gap between the moral values they profess and their actual behaviour on social media. This points to what Livingstone & Third (2017) have called the challenge of fostering genuinely rights-respecting and responsibility-oriented digital citizenship among youth—a form of civic education that must extend beyond traditional classroom settings into the digital environments where young people increasingly spend much of their social lives.

However, amid these various challenges, students also demonstrate resilience and creativity in maintaining national identity. They utilise social media for positive campaigns that promote local culture and build social solidarity. For instance, some students create educational content about Indonesian history, others campaign for tolerance and peace, and some organise social movements through digital platforms. This positive digital activism represents what Saud et al. (2023) identify as the emerging phenomenon of civic engagement in virtual spheres, where youth leverage digital tools for democratic participation and cultural expression. These findings indicate that national identity among students is not static or extinguished but rather dynamic and

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continuously negotiated through interaction with various global and local forces—confirming Hall (2019) insight that identity is always "in process" rather than fixed.

### Conclusion

This study concludes that students at Buana Perjuangan University, Karawang, possess an active and grounded understanding of national identity rooted in Pancasila values, cultural diversity (*kebhinekaan*), and mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*). While the implementation of character education through curricular and student organisational pathways yields positive outcomes, its overall effectiveness remains hindered by an overly transmissive pedagogical approach and the absence of systematic evaluation instruments. Furthermore, despite facing globalisation challenges such as lifestyle individualisation and the threat of pseudo-radicalism in digital spaces (Suyanto et al., 2022), students demonstrate strong agency and resilience by leveraging digital platforms and civic networks to maintain and express their sense of national belonging.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in relation to this study.

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