

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE FLEXIBLE EDUCATION WITH SOUL (FlexS) MODEL IN ENHANCING STAFF ENGAGEMENT AT UNIVERSITI SULTAN ZAINAL ABIDIN (UniSZA)

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Abstract- The Flexible Education with Soul (FlexS) model introduced at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Malaysia represents a transformative approach to higher education by integrating lifelong learning, spiritual values, and professional ethics. This study evaluates the effectiveness of FlexS programs in enhancing staff knowledge, practice, and internalization of its four core pillars: (1) sound faith/metaphysics, (2) scientific reasoning, (3) noble character, and (4) professional work ethics. Employing a mixed-methods design, the research collected quantitative data from 320 staff members through structured surveys and qualitative insights from in-depth interviews. Quantitative findings revealed high mean scores for knowledge ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.69$), practice ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.47$), and internalization ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.71$), indicating strong engagement with FlexS principles. Regression analysis demonstrated that knowledge was the most significant predictor of internalization ($\beta = 0.513$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 36.8% of the variance. Qualitative themes highlighted enhanced value internalization, improved workplace well-being, and identified challenges such as the need for clearer guidelines.

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INTRODUCTION

The global higher education landscape is witnessing a paradigm shift that recognizes the integration of moral and spiritual dimensions as central to holistic student development. In response, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) as one of the public higher education institution in Malaysia introduced the Flexible Education with Soul (FlexS) model in 2017 which serves as an educational innovation designed to cultivate intellectual, moral, and professional competencies grounded in Islamic principles. FlexS conceptualizes learning as a balance between cognitive growth and affective-moral formation, structured through three interrelated components: foundation, orientation, and pillars. The foundational component integrates the Islamic concept of *ta'lim wa tarbiyah* or imparting knowledge while nurturing holistic moral, spiritual, and character development. This is supported by four core pillars namely sound faith, sound reasoning, noble character, and professional work ethics. These elements collectively foster spiritual grounding, ethical decision-making, critical inquiry, and workplace adaptability. From a psychological and methodological standpoint, the FlexS model provides a framework for assessing the integration of values within educational behavior and professional functioning. Its design emphasizes the internalization of moral constructs that shape motivation, engagement, and self-regulation as key constructs within applied educational psychology. However, empirical validation of such value-based educational frameworks remains limited. Addressing this gap, the present study employs a mixed-method evaluation to examine the psychometric properties and applied outcomes of FlexS implementation among academic staff.

Specifically, the study examines three dimensions of engagement: (i) cognitive understanding of FlexS principles (Knowledge), (ii) behavioral application in daily professional contexts (Practice), and (iii) affective and value-based alignment with the FlexS ethos (Internalization). Findings from this study aim to contribute to the methodological discourse on assessing value-based education through measurable constructs. The results are expected to provide evidence-based insights for educational psychologists, curriculum designers, and institutional leaders seeking to operationalize and evaluate moral-spiritual learning outcomes in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of core values within educational institutions has garnered increasing attention, particularly in the context of value-based education. As universities strive to produce graduates with both intellectual competence and ethical integrity, scholarly attention has turned toward understanding how knowledge, practical application, and internalization of values interrelate in shaping academic and professional behavior.

According to Kamarul Syukri (2023), the concept of Flexible Education with Soul as a strategic framework that not only embraces structural and pedagogical flexibility but also re-centers education on moral values, intellectual tradition, and the human-divine relationship. This framework underscores the importance of preserving the spirit and essence of education amid rapid technological and societal changes. The work also articulates the evolving role of the academician as both a knowledge cultivator and a moral guide within the 21st-century educational agenda. Kamarul's analysis offers valuable insights for reimagining higher education in a manner that is both adaptable and anchored in enduring humanistic values.

Prior studies also highlight the role of training in behavioral change and organizational performance (Chiaburu & Marinova, 2005; Gabr, 2000). However, few examine spiritual-integrated models in higher education. Bandura (1986), posits that individuals learn through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. This theoretical foundation aligns with FlexS's emphasis on role modeling and experiential learning. Additionally, Kirkpatrick's Four-Level Training Evaluation Model (2016) provides a comprehensive framework for assessing the effectiveness of the FlexS program. The first level, reaction, focuses on participants' satisfaction and engagement with the program. The second level, learning, evaluates the extent to which participants have acquired the intended knowledge and skills. The third level, behavior, examines how well participants apply what they have learned in their actual work settings. The final level, results, assesses the overall impact of the program on organizational outcomes, such as productivity, workplace culture, and performance improvements.

The necessity of evidence-based research is paramount in assessing the extent to which success is achieved through the various programs and training initiatives conducted by an organization. Training is regarded as a strategic investment made by institutions to develop a workforce that is competitive, competent, and of high quality. Therefore, every investment made in the form of organized programs, activities, or training must be systematically evaluated to ensure that the resources expended result in measurable impact and align with the intended objectives (Wan Idros, 2001; Maizatul, 2002; Aviana & Enrico, 2004). Without such evaluation, organizations risk misallocating resources and missing opportunities for targeted improvement and strategic development.

Within this context, it becomes crucial to examine the effectiveness of the programs implemented under the FlexS initiative. Such evaluation allows for the establishment of a structured framework for continuous improvement and the reinforcement of the core values embedded in the FlexS philosophy. Lewin (1993) emphasized that program and training evaluation plays an essential role in enabling the identification of more effective strategies to achieve institutional objectives. In this study, the FlexS initiative includes a series of workshops, activities, and training sessions designed to integrate Islamic values in alignment with its foundational vision. Accordingly, a thorough analysis of program effectiveness is essential not only to validate the impact of these initiatives but also to ensure that the goals of FlexS are being met in a sustainable and meaningful way (Mizan Adilah et al., 2003). This study bridges this gap by providing a data-driven assessment of FlexS's impact, contributing to the broader discourse on holistic education frameworks.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to ensure comprehensive data collection. The quantitative component involved the administration of surveys using Likert scales ranging from 1 to 5 to assess participants' levels of knowledge, practice, and internalization related to the FlexS program. Complementing this, the qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews with five selected staff members to gain deeper insights into their experiences and the challenges encountered during program implementation. The sampling strategy was guided by Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling table, through which 320 staff members were randomly selected from 40 departments at UniSZA. The sample was designed to ensure adequate representation across gender, age groups, and professional roles, including both academic and administrative staff.

TABLE 1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	134	41.9%
	Female	186	58.1%

Age	≤ 25 26-35 years 36-45 years 46 – 55 years ≥ 56	7 101 163 42 7	2.2% 31.6% 50.9% 13.1% 2.2%
Ethnicity	Malay Chinese Indian Others	309 1 1 9	96.6% 0.3% 0.3% 2.8%

The demographic profile of the respondents indicates a higher representation of female staff (58.1%) compared to male staff (41.9%). In terms of age distribution, the majority of participants were within the 36–45 year age group (50.9%), followed by those aged 26–35 years (31.6%). Smaller proportions were observed among participants aged 46–55 years (13.1%) and those aged 25 years and below or 56 years and above (each 2.2%). Ethnic composition was predominantly Malay (96.6%), with minimal representation from Chinese (0.3%), Indian (0.3%), and other ethnic groups (2.8%). This distribution suggests that the sample reflects the typical demographic structure of the UniSZA workforce, particularly in terms of gender and ethnicity, with a strong presence of mid-career professionals.

DATA ANALYSIS

Knowledge, practice and internalization are three components central to assessing the effectiveness of the FlexS initiative in fostering value-based engagement within the university community. Through descriptive statistical analysis, the study aims to provide an overview of how well staff understand, implement, and internalize the core values promoted by the programme. The analysis draws on mean scores and standard deviations to capture both the central tendencies and variability of responses, thereby offering insight into the overall consistency and depth of FlexS adoption across the institution.

Finding 1: The Level of Knowledge, Practice, and Internalization of FlexS Core Values among UniSZA Staff

This section presents the analysis of data related to the level of knowledge, practice, and internalization of FlexS core values among UniSZA staff.

TABLE 2 Mean Scores of Knowledge, Practice, and Internalization

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Knowledge	320	4.1013	.68627
Practice	320	4.4667	.46739
Internalization	320	4.2375	.70987

Table 2 shows that the mean score for Knowledge was 4.1013, indicating a level of knowledge that leans toward the maximum value on a 5-point scale. The standard deviation of 0.68627 suggests that the distribution of Knowledge scores falls within a moderate range around the mean, with relatively low variability, implying that most respondents possessed a similar level of knowledge.

For Practice, the mean score was 4.4667, reflecting a very high level of practice, closely approaching the maximum possible score. The standard deviation of 0.46739 indicates a narrow distribution around the mean, demonstrating a high degree of consistency in respondents' practices.

Meanwhile, the mean score for Internalization was 4.2375, representing a high level of value internalization. The standard deviation of 0.70987, slightly higher compared to Knowledge and Practice, indicates a relatively greater variation among respondents in their level of internalization, although still within a moderate range. Overall, the findings suggest that respondents exhibited a high level of knowledge regarding the FlexS initiative. The study also reveals that both the level of practice and the internalization of FlexS core values were high among respondents, with Practice registering the highest mean score and the least variability, indicating strong and consistent application of these values in practice.

Finding 2: The Effectiveness of the FlexS Programme in Enhancing the Internalization and Practice of FlexS Core Values among UniSZA Staff

A correlation analysis was conducted to assess the relationships between Knowledge, Practice, and Internalization among the respondents (N = 320). The data were analyzed using Spearman's rank-order correlation to determine the strength and direction of the associations among these three variables.

TABLE 3 Non-Parametric Correlation Analysis

			Knowledge	Practice	Internalization
Spearman's rho	Knowledge	Correlation Co-efficient	1.000	.392**	.549**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000
		N	320	320	320
	Practice	Correlation Co-efficient	.392**	1.000	.408**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000
		N	320	320	320
	Internalization	Correlation Co-efficient	.549**	.408**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.
		N	320	320	320

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

The analysis using Spearman's rho revealed a statistically significant moderate positive correlation between Knowledge and Practice ($r = 0.392$, $p < .01$), indicating that staff members with higher levels of knowledge of the FlexS core values tend to engage more in related practices.

A stronger and statistically significant positive correlation was also found between Knowledge and Internalization ($r = 0.549$, $p < .01$). This suggests that as staff members' knowledge increases, their depth of internalizing these core values also improves, pointing to a more meaningful integration of FlexS values in their personal and professional mindset.

Additionally, the correlation between Practice and Internalization was also significant and positive ($r = 0.408$, $p < .01$). This finding implies that increased engagement in practicing the FlexS values contributes positively to their internalization, reinforcing the idea that lived experiences enhance value absorption. Taken together, all correlations among the three variables namely Knowledge, Practice, and Internalization are statistically significant and positively related. Among these, the strongest association is observed between Knowledge and Internalization, emphasizing the critical role of cognitive understanding in facilitating value adoption and embodiment.

TABLE 4 Regression Analysis

Model	R	R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
	.607 ^a	.368	.56596

To examine the strength of the influence of Knowledge and Practice on Internalization, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. As shown in the table below, the R value is 0.607, indicating a moderately strong relationship between the independent variables (Knowledge and Practice) and the dependent variable (Internalization).

The R Square value is 0.368, which suggestss that Knowledge and Practice collectively explain 36.8% of the variance in Internalization ($R^2 = 0.368$). The remaining 63.2% of the variance is attributed to other factors that may influence the internalization of FlexS core values among staff, beyond knowledge and practice.

Table 5 further presents the extent to which Knowledge and Practice predict respondents' Internalization of FlexS core values.

TABLE 5 Regression Analysis of the Influence of Knowledge and Practice on Internalization

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Beta	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error			
(Constant)	.768	.317		2.424	.016
Knowledge	.530	.049	.513	10.741	.000
Practice	.290	.072	.191	3.999	.000

Based on the table above, Knowledge emerged as the most dominant predictor of Internalization ($\text{Beta} = 0.513$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Practice ($\text{Beta} = 0.191$, $p < 0.001$). These results indicate that Knowledge contributes more significantly to the internalization of FlexS values compared to Practice.

To support the quantitative findings, this study also conducted semi-structured interviews with five respondents comprising both administrative and academic staff to explore their experiences regarding the effectiveness

of the FlexS programme. Thematic analysis of the interview data identified several key themes, including enhanced internalization of FlexS values, positive impacts on staff, as well as challenges and suggestions for improvement.

Theme 1: Enhanced Internalization of FlexS Values

A key finding that emerged from the qualitative data was the enhanced internalization of values promoted by the FlexS (Flexible Education with Soul) programme. Informant 1 articulated that the programme was instrumental in “deeply internalizing the true essence of FlexS values,” indicating a meaningful shift from mere theoretical understanding to genuine personal embodiment of the values. This process of internalization appears to have taken root beyond formal learning contexts, extending into daily personal and professional conduct.

The FlexS model, designed to integrate intellectual, emotional, and spiritual dimensions into educational delivery, appears to foster the holistic development of academic staff. According to the informant, the programme’s emphasis on nurturing murabbi (educators as mentors), mu’allim (knowledge transmitters), and muaddib (educators of adab or ethics) resonates strongly with the Islamic educational tradition. By consciously practicing the FlexS values, the informant expressed an increased sense of responsibility not only towards their own character formation but also toward modeling these values for students. This alignment of personal values with professional ethos is crucial for institutions seeking to embed value-based education. The informant’s aspiration to become an exemplary educator who embodies both knowledge and character highlights a transformative process of self-reflection and intentional growth.

The narrative suggests that the FlexS model goes beyond conventional training programmes; it positions itself as a moral compass and pedagogical framework capable of cultivating educators who are not only competent in their disciplines but also ethically grounded and spiritually aware. Moreover, the internalization of FlexS values was perceived as transferable. Informants noted that the knowledge and ethical paradigms instilled through the programme were being consciously extended to students through mentoring, classroom interaction, and curriculum design. In this regard, FlexS operates not merely as a staff development programme but as a catalyst for cultural change within the academic environment. When educators consistently reflect and act upon foundational values, the educational institution as a whole moves toward its vision of nurturing graduates who are intellectually excellent and morally upright.

Theme 2: Positive Impact on Staff

The second significant theme that emerged from the interviews was the positive psychological and professional impact of the FlexS programme on staff well-being and productivity. Informant 2 reported that participation in the programme contributed to reducing stress associated with fulfilling core academic responsibilities. This finding is in line with recent studies highlighting the role of value-based programmes in enhancing emotional resilience and promoting mental well-being among higher education staff (Muda et al., 2021).

The integration of spiritual and ethical principles into the academic routine appears to create a more supportive and meaningful work environment. Informants 4 and 5 further reinforced this observation by emphasizing how the FlexS framework facilitated greater balance between personal self-management and professional obligations. Rather than viewing work as a burdensome set of tasks, staff members began to experience their roles as educators with a renewed sense of purpose and inner alignment. This balance between the internal (spiritual and emotional) and external (professional and institutional) dimensions of work is central to the Islamic concept of trust, wherein professional duties are regarded as divine responsibilities.

Participants also noted improvements in work productivity, which they attributed to the reflective and structured nature of the FlexS programme. By cultivating practices such as goal setting, self-awareness, ethical decision-making, and continuous spiritual development, FlexS encourages the university staff to redirect their time and energy toward more meaningful engagement. The emphasis on soulful education encouraged participants to be more present, empathetic, and intentional in their daily interactions qualities that are often eroded in high-stress academic settings.

Beyond individual benefits, participants recognized the long-term value of the programme for institutional growth. They perceived FlexS not only as a tool for individual transformation but as a systemic initiative that could strengthen the academic culture of the university. By instilling shared values among staff, the programme potentially enhances organizational coherence, improves collaboration, and fosters a collective commitment to the university’s mission. This echoes contemporary scholarship on values-based leadership and institutional integrity, where alignment between personal values and organizational goals leads to increased job satisfaction and institutional loyalty.

Theme 3: Challenges and Suggestions for Improvement

While the findings generally reflect a positive reception of the FlexS programme, several informants also highlighted areas for improvement, particularly in relation to implementation. Informant 3 emphasized the need for a more structured and consistent approach in applying FlexS values within professional practice and in student engagement. The informant observed that while the conceptual framework of FlexS is sound and inspiring, its practical application remains inconsistent and dependent on individual initiative rather than institutional enforcement.

This sentiment reveals a gap between the ideals promoted in training and their operationalization in daily practice. The lack of standardized guidelines, assessment tools, and follow-up mechanisms were perceived as barriers to the full integration of FlexS values across the university. Without institutional reinforcement, the risk exists that FlexS may be reduced to a one-off motivational event rather than a sustained developmental strategy.

Informants suggested that clearer guidelines and outcome-based indicators could improve the programme's impact. For example, the inclusion of rubrics for self-assessment, peer evaluation, and values-based KPIs could encourage staff to continuously align their work practices with FlexS principles. Additionally, participants recommended the development of mentorship schemes, where senior staff embodying the values could guide junior colleagues in translating FlexS into practical action.

While educators may embrace the model, its influence on students depends largely on its integration into teaching methodologies, assessment formats, and campus-wide activities. Informants called for a more integrated institutional approach that aligns curriculum design, student support services, and extracurricular programmes with the FlexS framework. Such an approach would ensure that students, like staff, undergo a holistic developmental process that balances intellectual growth with character formation. Finally, a recurring recommendation was the need for ongoing support and feedback loops. Staff members emphasized the importance of periodic refresher sessions, reflective discussions, and communities of practice that allow for collective sharing and continuous learning. These platforms could serve to refine the model based on lived experiences and changing institutional needs.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that UniSZA staff possess a high level of knowledge regarding the FlexS programme, alongside strong levels of practice and internalization of its core values. The quantitative data clearly show that Knowledge is the most significant predictor of Internalization, as evidenced by a strong and statistically significant beta coefficient. This supports the theoretical perspective that cognitive understanding serves as a foundation for value-based behavior change (Heimlich & Ardo: 2008). When individuals have a clear understanding of an initiative's objectives and principles, they are more likely to incorporate them meaningfully into their attitudes and actions. The qualitative findings complement and enrich the quantitative results. Informants reported that the FlexS programme provided them with a deeper understanding of the core values it promotes. This aligns with transformative learning theory, which suggests that knowledge acquisition, when embedded within reflective and contextual learning, can lead to shifts in perspective and behavior (Trevisan, Leal Filho & Pedrozo: 2024). Informant 1, for instance, emphasized the ability to internalize the FlexS values more deeply and transfer them into daily practice and student mentorship. This echoes the findings of Susilawati, Yasin, Rahmaniah, Chakim & Supriyatno (2022), which argue that internalization is most effective when values are taught not only cognitively but also modeled and lived. Thus the integration of religious moral values should be embedded throughout the entire educational journey, including classroom instruction, co-curricular and extracurricular activities, academic advising sessions, and daily life experiences within and beyond the campus environment. Moreover, FlexS programme appears to contribute positively to staff well-being and job performance. Informants reported that FlexS helped them manage work-related stress and maintain personal balance, reinforcing the view that value-based institutional programmes can promote psychological resilience and workplace satisfaction. In particular, Informants 4 and 5 linked their improved productivity and work-life harmony to the FlexS framework, suggesting that such initiatives may serve dual purposes: instilling organizational values and fostering staff well-being. This supports findings by Mahmud (2024), who observed that Islamic value-based interventions in public universities contributed to increased engagement and mental health among staff.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study also highlights areas for further development. One key issue raised was the inconsistency in value implementation across staff groups. Informant 3, for example, noted the absence of clear guidelines for value application, which limits the potential for systematic internalization. This concern reflects broader challenges in institutionalizing values in higher education, particularly when implementation lacks operational clarity. The absence of structured reinforcement mechanisms may lead to fragmented practices, reducing the overall effectiveness of such programmes.

Furthermore, while knowledge contributes significantly to internalization, the relatively lower influence of Practice in the regression model suggests that behavior alone may not guarantee deeper value absorption. This aligns with the distinction made in moral development literature between external compliance and intrinsic commitment (Kohlberg, 1981). Practice must be reinforced through reflective engagement, peer support, and leadership modeling to ensure values are not only performed but lived. This insight reinforces the need for an integrated strategy that combines cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions in staff development programmes.

CONCLUSION

The programmes under the Flexible Education with Soul (FlexS) initiative are conducted regularly throughout the year at UniSZA. These programmes include a series of workshops, activities, and reinforcement training sessions aimed at enhancing staff members' understanding of FlexS and integrating Islamic values in line with the spirit of the initiative. Overall, the study found that Knowledge of FlexS and its Practice are key factors influencing

staff members' Internalization of the initiative. Increasing individual knowledge can lead to a significant improvement in internalization. While Practice also contributes to internalization, its influence is comparatively smaller than that of Knowledge. The study further indicates that understanding FlexS facilitated through structured activities and curricular integration is a critical component in fostering internalization of its values, with Practice serving as a supporting mechanism. Therefore, to enhance the level of internalization among staff, greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening knowledge acquisition, alongside organising activities that reinforce the practical application of FlexS principles.

In light of these findings, future iterations of the FlexS programme should include structured training modules, clear guidelines for implementation, and regular reflective sessions to deepen value internalization. Follow-up support and mentoring mechanisms can further enhance consistent value application. Moreover, integrating feedback loops from staff can help continuously refine programme delivery. In sum, while the FlexS programme has demonstrated strong foundational impact, its long-term effectiveness will depend on systematic reinforcement and holistic integration within the university's academic and administrative culture.

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