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(IJEPC)<https://gaexcellence.com/ijepc>THE ROLE OF GRIT IN BRIDGING STUDENT
ACHIEVEMENT AND MALAYSIA'S NATIONAL
ASPIRATIONS

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Abstract:

The concept of grit refers to desire and perseverance, which is essential to achieving an individual's life objectives. It enables them to stay focused on their goals by sustaining effort and interest in facing difficulties in life. Generally, students with high levels of grit are more resilient and stay focused on their goals, even when they are facing challenges in life. This conceptual paper theorizes the multi-level role of grit as a crucial psychological asset which links individual undergraduate success to Malaysia's aspirations. It further synthesizes the current empirical literature regarding how grit influences the graduates' academic achievement and personal and professional focusing explicitly on mitigating the "strawberry mindset" and enhancing career adaptability. It further explores how grit can be integrated into educational policy and practice to align students' success with long-term national goals.

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Introduction

Currently, the global education landscape is navigating a paradigm shift where cognitive ability which was once the only criterion for success, is now being reevaluated with non-cognitive character traits. As the nation transitions from the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) toward the newly conceptualised National Education Blueprint (2026-2035), the emphasis has moved beyond the mere delivery of content to the development of "future-proof" graduates. Despite decades of investment, recent data from PISA 2022 and TIMSS 2023 indicate that Malaysian students continue to underperform compared to international averages in core competencies like Mathematics and Science (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2023). When facing with real challenges, some frequently wonder why a few students give up while others continue and improve their grades. According to Martin et al (2022), researchers found there are various factors that support and correlate with academic performance. Cognitive factors, learners' motivation, or personal characteristics are the factors that may affect students' academic performance (Sánchez-Álvarez et al., 2020; Howard et al., 2021). This performance gap suggests that the challenge is not merely a lack of resources or curriculum design, but perhaps a deficit in the psychological resilience required to master complex, long-term challenges.

In line with the Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint, higher education institutions are assigned to produce holistic graduates who have "stamina" or "mental toughness" when they are facing workplace challenges. By having these qualities, they can spearhead the nation's transition into a high-income economy. However, there is a significant gap between the graduates' academic achievement and their psychological readiness to meet the national aspirations. Based on the industry feedback, there is deficiency in 'grit', lack of passion and perseverance for long-term goals though Malaysian HEIs successfully produce high volumes of high-achieving graduates. There is evidence in the declining of graduates' employability and their lack of resilience when facing high-pressure professional environments. A study by Kasim (2025) found that the main issue in employability of graduates is though they are academically qualified, they lack soft skills communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence. They tend to avoid distress or challenges which could make it hard for them to meet employers' expectations, and they are known to have a "strawberry mind set" (Kasim, 2025). Similarly, Ong and Fong (2025) also believe that in Malaysia, this issue has received a lot of attention because of the rapid change of job market where graduates are required to have relevant skills, knowledge, and adaptability in addition to their academic qualifications. Prime Minister

Anwar Ibrahim, through the Malaysia MADANI framework, has frequently asserted that the true value of education lies in fostering "human values" and "resilience." The aspiration is to move away from a "rote-learning" culture toward one that produces thinkers who are not easily discouraged by failure. This raises a fundamental question for educators and policymakers alike: What specific psychological asset enables a student to translate their innate potential into sustained high achievement? This study, therefore, explores the role of grit among higher education students as a vital mediator in bridging individual academic performance with the broader socio-economic aspirations of Malaysia.

The concept of grit has emerged as a compelling answer to this question. First popularised by Angela Duckworth, grit is defined as the passion and perseverance for especially long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). It is the quality that allows an individual to maintain focus and effort over the years, despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. Unlike intelligence (IQ), which remains relatively stable over a lifetime, grit is considered a malleable trait—meaning it can be taught, nurtured, and institutionalised within a school system.

Grit is fundamentally composed of two distinct sub-constructs. The first is Consistency of Interest, which refers to the ability to remain committed to a specific pursuit without being frequently distracted by new or competing goals. The second, and often more predictive, component is Perseverance of Effort, which describes the tendency to work hard and remain resilient in the face of obstacles (Oxford & Hassan, 2021). In the Malaysian context, where students face high-stakes examinations and a volatile job market, cultivating these two components is essential. This paper highlights that by systematically integrating grit-based interventions into the national curriculum, Malaysia can bridge the widening gap between current student achievement and the national aspiration for a resilient, globally competitive society.

Objective of the Study

This conceptual paper aims to theorize the multi-level role of grit as a critical psychological asset which links individual undergraduate success to Malaysia's aspirations. It synthesizes the current empirical literature pertaining to how the graduates' academic achievement and personal and professional development are influenced by grit, emphasizing on alleviating their "strawberry mindset" and improving their career adaptability.

Literature Review

This review addresses the existing literature concerning the role of grit as a critical psychological asset and its relation to students' academic achievement, social equity, and national aspiration.

The Foundational Impact of Grit on Academic Achievement

The academic interest in grit has surged over the last decade as researchers seek to explain why some students with high IQs fail to achieve their potential, while those with average IQs often excel. A landmark meta-analysis by Lam and Zhou (2021), which synthesised 137 studies involving over 285,000 students globally, found a moderate-to-strong positive correlation (effect size of 0.39) between grit and academic achievement. This aligns with earlier

foundational research by Crede et al (2017), which established that grit specifically the "perseverance of effort" dimension—is a better predictor of graduation rates and long-term success than traditional standardised test scores.

Grit in the Asian and Malaysian Context (2019–2026)

Cultural context plays a significant role in how grit is manifested. Recent studies conducted between 2019 and 2026 have focused specifically on the Asian educational experience, which is often characterised by high family expectations and rigorous academic competition. In a longitudinal study of 1,577 adolescents, Cheung, Chan, and Lee (2025) discovered that grittier students were more likely to develop positive "possible selves"—vivid mental representations of their future success. This future-oriented self-concept acts as a motivator that helps students navigate current academic hardships.

Within Malaysia, local research has mirrored these global trends. A 2021 study at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) found that students with higher grit scores not only achieved better CGPAs but also reported significantly lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 2021). This suggests that grit acts as a psychological buffer, protecting students from the mental health crises that often accompany modern academic pressure. Furthermore, Sulong et al. (2024) conducted a five-year systematic review of higher education in Southeast Asia, concluding that grit is a primary driver of student retention and degree completion. They argued that for Malaysian universities to produce "industry-ready" graduates, they must prioritise character development alongside technical skills.

Grit as a Tool for Social Equity and National Aspiration

One of the most promising aspects of grit research is its potential to address social inequality. A 2025 cluster randomised controlled trial conducted by the University of Bremen demonstrated that web-based grit interventions were most effective for students from socially and academically disadvantaged backgrounds. These interventions helped "level the playing field" by providing underprivileged students with the psychological tools to persist in the face of systemic barriers (University of Bremen, 2025).

This finding is particularly relevant to Malaysia's national aspirations. The Ministry of Education (2023) has identified "narrowing the achievement gap" between urban and rural schools as a top priority. If grit can be cultivated through targeted classroom interventions, it offers a cost-effective method to empower students in B40 (lower income) communities. As Education Minister Fadhlina Sidek has stated, the true success of the Malaysian education system will not be measured by the top 1% of performers, but by the resilience and courtesy of the entire student population (The Ministry of Education, 2023). By fostering grit, the Malaysian education system can move beyond the "exam-factory" model toward a more holistic framework that aligns with the National Philosophy of Education, ultimately producing citizens who are both intellectually capable and emotionally resilient.

Characteristics of Grit and Challenges in Students' Life

Generally, people will experience burn out and they tend to give up easily when they do not have the two characteristics of grit which are passion and perseverance to achieve long term goals. Grit allows people to succeed as it strengthens people mentally to face challenges in

life. By having grit, it indicates the sign of courage and character strength (Villacís, Naval & De la Fuente, 2023).

According to Segar and Matore (2024), grit increases resilience, which is necessary for long-term success and allows people to successfully overcome obstacles and setbacks. Realistic and long-term goals can be set when an individual understand the importance of grit. He can approach obstacles with a fresh feeling of resolve, understanding that perseverance and diligence are more important than ever. Thus, by focusing on his weaknesses and working on improving himself, he can improve in areas he previously struggled with. In addition, by combining passion with purpose, can help him align his professional pursuit with a broader goal. By doing this, he not only fulfils his personal aims but also help others around him. This indirectly will help him feel motivated to contribute more to society and at the same time feel content.

Previous research shows that gritty students tend to have better grades and they have high level of retention on what have been taught in class. In addition, higher levels of life satisfaction are associated with grit and grit is linked to decreased depression among college students (Datu, 2021).

Influence of Grit on Student Achievement

Nowadays, parents are paying greater attention to grit. They claim a lack of it causes them concern as they believe their children will not be resilient enough to deal with life's inevitable setbacks. This is particularly true for families that prefer to spoil their kids and shield them from disappointment. According to Duckworth et al (2007), youngsters who are exposed to failure will grow more determined and eventually succeed. Thus, hardships can teach youngsters be determined and resilient in facing today's challenges and they will not be fragile.

Nowadays, behaviours and attitudes of Gen Z have become common topics as some people view this generation negatively and they are often labelled as the 'fragile' generation (Huang & Frost, 2025). They are also linked to 'strawberry generation' that refers to things that look beautiful outside, but delicate and gentle inside (Aulia et al, 2022). They are compared to strawberries as they can spoil quickly if not stored properly. Likewise, this generation when placed in situations that do not foster growth, they may become burned out or lose interest more quickly. However, by having empathy, openness, and communicative leadership, they can reach their full potential because they are able to work fast, like to try new things, and want to see progress in their work.' (Widad Emir, 2025).

Tugabirwe and Rukundo (2024) in their correlational study among undergraduate science teachers (391 participants) at MUST At Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST) Uganda found out that academic achievement and grit were positively correlated, with high grit leading to high academic achievement. Grit is one of the non-cognitive elements that influences college students' academic success. Motivation, attitude, and temperament are examples of non-cognitive factors.

Based on their study with a sample of 395 students in 13 private STMIKs in Indonesia, Gat, Kosasi and Sulastri (2021) find that students' academic achievement was positively impacted by grit and online learning. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that the indirect impact of grit on students' academic success is mediated via online learning. According to the statistical

test, an increase in grit has a 72.7% impact on improving academic achievement, while an increase in online learning has a 12.0% impact. Therefore, it is essential for higher education institutions to motivate students to be enthusiastic about reaching their objectives. Additionally, because of grit and the impact of online learning on students' academic accomplishment, higher education institutions must prioritize students' participation through online learning.

Learning either using the traditional method or online has become challenging nowadays as gen z (1997-2012) and generation alpha (2013-2024) are more exposed to technology and experience less hardships. Thus, having grit is important as it helps an individual to stay persistent and committed in facing the unpredictable challenges in today's era.

Influence of Grit on Students' Personal and Professional Development

Nowadays, the world is evolving dynamically and has been extremely competitive for every one of us, especially those who are students. To stand among the excellent group, it is believed that one should have a valuable psychological trait which is grit. Grit has been defined as the combination of passion and perseverance to achieve long term objectives despite facing a lot of difficulties and failures (Rusadi et al., 2023). Therefore, this important psychological trait can influence students' personal and professional development in many ways which will be further discussed below.

In the context of personal development, a recent study conducted by Guo et al., (2025) among university students in China claimed that grit contributes significantly to transforming students' inner trait, mental well-being and cognitive habits through sustained personal growth along with teacher care. It has been found that students with higher levels of grit within themselves tend to have a stable mental well-being and more resilience in their study.

Scholars often connect grit within students with mental discomfort components such as stress, anxiety, difficult situations and depressions. When facing this kind of discomfort in their studies, gritty individuals tend to possess sufficient psychological endurance to face the challenges. In Indonesia, a study carried out by Annisa et al., (2024) which involved 817 students in total (275 male and 542 female) from 13 different high schools in the nation highlights that there is a difference between the level of grit among female and male students. Female students possess a higher level of grit within themselves which helps them in handling mental discomfort better than the male students, Higher level of grit also contributes for the female students to stay focused in achieving their goals.

Grit is also closely related to students' self-efficacy. In the Malaysian context, research by Khairuddin et al (2026) examined the three interrelated factors in academic achievement namely grit, motivation, and self-regulated learning among Malaysian undergraduates. This study involved 146 undergraduate students from 3 public universities across the country. They were students from various bachelor's degree programs. 92 of them were female and the remaining 54 were male students. Results of this study suggest that there is a positive correlation between all three interrelated factors examined throughout the study. It can be seen in the study that gritty students were able to self-regulate their learning strategies as they were able to demonstrate positive attitude in planning and motivation when they were trying to focus on their studies.

Moving on to the influence of grit on students' professional development, there is a positive relation between grit and the professional development of the students. A study carried out in Chongqing, China among college students by Li et al., (2021) investigated the career adaptability of Chinese college students based on the self-regulatory processes. 1000 students were selected through a random sampling method. The majority (683) of the participants were female while the remaining were male. More than half (506) of them were in their 19 or 20 in terms of age. The findings of the study suggest that grit is to be significantly linked to career adaptability among the participants through greater career exploration and decision making, positive affect and goal commitment.

In the working context, grit is closely linked to professionalism. Study conducted by Taylan and Özkan (2025) attempted to investigate the role of passion and grit in students' professional attitudes and behaviours. Participants of the study were 216 nursing students from a state university in the Mediterranean. They were in their second, third and fourth year of nursing study with different levels of passion and grit towards the nursing program. As expected, and in line with the theory of grit, the study concluded that there is a positive relationship between passion, grit and professional attitudes and behaviours. This finding suggests that an individual that has a higher level of grit and passion towards his or her work tends to portray a more professional attitude at workplace.

Grit Connection to National Aspiration

In relation to Malaysia's national aspiration where The Ministry of Education (2023) has identified "narrowing the achievement gap" between urban and rural schools as the main focus, there is an urgent need for us to prepare the students with sufficient level of grit and professional attitude to ensure that they are able to stay and progress at work for a long time in order to earn enough and lessen the gap. Osman et al., (2023) in their study asserted that there is a need for us to foster the two traits namely grit and resilience in the Malaysian education context especially among the B40 students. They believe that these traits can be enhanced among B40 students through self-regulated learning and concerted efforts by parents, schools and the government.

Based on the discussion above, grit is an important element that should be fostered among students. This will make them do better in school and be a professional worker at a workplace with a high level of mental stability to face challenges and not easily give up. With this, they can continue to benefit the society as a whole.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, the so called the 'fragile' generation is characterized by graduates' tendency to avoid challenges indicates there is an urgent need for higher education and government to foster environments that could develop grit, resilience, and self-awareness and encourage perseverance to prepare them for job market competition. While academic achievements remain significant, the growing emphasis on holistic development, mainly the development of grit, resilience, and essential soft skill has become increasingly significant. By bridging the gap between students' academic performance and the demands of a high-income economy, this has equipped graduates with the mental fortitude and necessary adaptation to succeed. As Malaysia continues to navigate its transition into a high-income nation, prioritizing the development of these qualities will be essential in transforming graduates into resilient and efficient leaders

who can effectively contribute to the nation's aspirations. In future, more research among different populations is necessary to be employed to further describe the grit construct and to better understand its relationship to other achievement and the role it plays in personal and professional development and academic success. Future studies should investigate measures that need to be taken by institutions of higher learning and the government to best support the students' academic achievement and their professional development.

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