

Soft Skills Development in Indonesian Islamic Higher Education: Institutional Practices and the SSDIHE Model for Society 5.0

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Draft article history
Submitted: 11-19-2025;
Revised: 02-15-2026;
Accepted: 02-23-2026;

ABSTRACT: This study examines how leaders and lecturers at Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia conceptualize, implement, and evaluate soft skills development for students, with particular attention to its relevance in the Society 5.0 era. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with institutional leaders and lecturers from thirteen PTKI representing diverse geographical and organizational contexts. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, strategic orientations, and institutional challenges. The findings indicate that soft skills development in PTKI is not treated as an auxiliary component of higher education, but as an integral dimension of Islamic educational objectives aimed at producing holistic graduates. Core soft skills emphasized across institutions include effective communication, teamwork, leadership, critical and reflective thinking, time management, and ethical integrity, all of which are framed within Islamic moral and spiritual values. The study further reveals that effective soft skills development relies on systematic curricular integration, experiential and project-based learning, participation in student organizations, and the strategic use of digital technologies. However, institutional constraints such as limited assessment instruments, uneven lecturer capacity, and the absence of standardized implementation frameworks remain significant challenges. Based on these findings, this study proposes the SSDIHE (Soft Skills Development for Islamic Higher Education) model, structured around four interrelated pillars: integration of Islamic values, experience-based learning, mentoring and role modeling, and Islamic digital literacy. This model offers a conceptual contribution by linking empirical practices in PTKI with a coherent framework for soft skills development, thereby strengthening the paradigm of holistic Islamic higher education that is adaptive, value-driven, and competitive in the context of Society 5.0.

Keywords: *soft skills*, Islamic higher education, integration of religion and science, PTKI lecturers.

ABSTRAK: Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana pimpinan dan dosen di Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam (PTKI) di Indonesia mengonseptualisasikan, mengimplementasikan, dan mengevaluasi pengembangan soft skills mahasiswa, dengan perhatian khusus pada relevansinya di era Society 5.0. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif deskriptif, dengan pengumpulan data melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap pimpinan institusi dan dosen dari tiga belas PTKI yang mewakili beragam konteks geografis dan organisasi. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola yang berulang, orientasi strategis, dan tantangan institusional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pengembangan soft skills di PTKI tidak dipandang sebagai komponen tambahan dalam pendidikan tinggi, melainkan sebagai dimensi integral dari tujuan pendidikan Islam yang bertujuan menghasilkan lulusan yang holistik. Soft skills utama yang ditekankan di berbagai institusi

meliputi komunikasi efektif, kerja sama tim, kepemimpinan, berpikir kritis dan reflektif, manajemen waktu, serta integritas etika, yang seluruhnya dibingkai dalam nilai-nilai moral dan spiritual Islam. Penelitian ini juga mengungkapkan bahwa pengembangan soft skills yang efektif bergantung pada integrasi kurikulum yang sistematis, pembelajaran berbasis pengalaman dan proyek, partisipasi dalam organisasi kemahasiswaan, serta pemanfaatan teknologi digital secara strategis. Namun demikian, keterbatasan institusional seperti minimnya instrumen penilaian, kapasitas dosen yang belum merata, serta belum adanya kerangka implementasi yang terstandar masih menjadi tantangan yang signifikan. Berdasarkan temuan tersebut, penelitian ini mengusulkan model SSDIHE (Soft Skills Development for Islamic Higher Education) yang disusun atas empat pilar yang saling terkait, yaitu integrasi nilai-nilai Islam, pembelajaran berbasis pengalaman, mentoring dan keteladanan, serta literasi digital Islami. Model ini memberikan kontribusi konseptual dengan mengaitkan praktik empiris di PTKI dengan kerangka yang koheren untuk pengembangan soft skills, sehingga memperkuat paradigma pendidikan tinggi Islam yang holistik, adaptif, berbasis nilai, dan kompetitif dalam konteks Society 5.0.

Kata kunci: dosen PTKI, integrasi agama dan sains, pendidikan tinggi Islam, soft skills.

INTRODUCTION

The paradigm shift in twenty-first-century higher education requires universities to move beyond a narrow focus on academic achievement toward the systematic development of students' soft skills, including communication, collaboration, leadership, critical thinking, creativity, and moral integrity. These competencies are widely recognized as key indicators of graduates' readiness to navigate the complexity of contemporary professional and social life (Suartha et al., 2017). At the global level, the World Economic Forum (2023) identifies soft skills as among the most critical competencies demanded by future industries, particularly in the context of digital transformation and rapid technological disruption.

For Islamic Higher Education Institutions (Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam—PTKI), these demands carry a distinctive and urgent significance. PTKIs operate under a dual mandate: producing graduates who are academically competent while also embodying Islamic ethical and moral values. Students are therefore expected not only to master religious and scientific knowledge but also to translate this knowledge into ethical conduct within social, cultural, and professional domains. Nevertheless, empirical evidence suggests a persistent gap between academic proficiency and interpersonal competencies among Indonesian university graduates, including those from PTKIs (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). This gap poses a strategic challenge for PTKIs, as it potentially undermines their role in preparing graduates who are both competitive and morally grounded.

From a pedagogical perspective, this challenge is closely linked to learning practices that continue to prioritize cognitive outcomes and hard skills. In many higher education settings, soft skills are treated as incidental by-products of instruction rather than as explicit and systematically designed learning outcomes. Previous studies demonstrate that collaborative learning, problem-based learning, and project-based learning can effectively enhance students' communication, teamwork, leadership, and critical thinking skills (Barros &

Bittencourt, 2018; Zhang et al., 2022; Martínez-Ávila et al., 2023). However, these studies are predominantly situated within general or science-and-technology education contexts and are largely grounded in value-neutral or secular pedagogical assumptions.

This limitation becomes particularly evident when considering the PTKI context, where soft skills are inseparable from Islamic values such as *akhlaq* (moral conduct), *adab* (ethical comportment), *amanah* (trustworthiness), and moral responsibility. While classical and contemporary Islamic education literature strongly emphasizes character formation and spiritual development (Al-Attas, 1980; Abdullah, 2014), such discussions remain largely normative and insufficiently connected to curriculum design, instructional strategies, and institutional policy. As a result, there exists an analytical gap between modern soft skills research, which focuses on pedagogical effectiveness, and Islamic educational scholarship, which prioritizes moral and spiritual ideals without adequately operationalizing them.

Moreover, empirical studies that examine how PTKIs conceptualize, implement, and evaluate soft skills development in practice remain scarce. The perspectives of key internal stakeholders—such as institutional leaders, lecturers, and quality assurance units—are rarely explored as primary sources for understanding strategies, constraints, and opportunities related to soft skills development within rapidly evolving social, digital, and religious contexts. This absence indicates that the issue of soft skills in PTKIs is not merely conceptual but structural and practical in nature.

In response to these gaps, this study aims to empirically explore models of soft skills development in Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions that are grounded in Islamic values while remaining responsive to twenty-first-century demands. The study is guided by the following research questions: How do PTKI leaders and lecturers perceive the urgency of students' soft skills development? What models, strategies, and approaches are employed by PTKIs to integrate soft skills into curricula and learning practices? What factors facilitate and constrain the development of students' soft skills within PTKIs?

A descriptive qualitative approach is employed to obtain an in-depth understanding of institutional practices and dynamics related to soft skills development. This approach enables a contextual analysis of the interaction between Islamic values, institutional policies, and pedagogical practices.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the development of an operational framework for soft skills enhancement that integrates twenty-first-century pedagogy with Islamic ethical and spiritual values. Rather than treating values as abstract ideals, this study positions them as foundational elements in the cultivation of global competencies. Practically, the findings offer empirically grounded insights that can inform curriculum design, instructional strategies, and faculty development initiatives within PTKIs.

The novelty of this research does not rest on the claim of integration alone but on its effort to bridge two scholarly traditions that have largely evolved in parallel: soft skills research in modern higher education and value-based

Islamic education. By situating soft skills development within a contextualized Islamic spiritual framework, this study provides an alternative perspective for value-oriented higher education in the digital era and Society 5.0.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design, informed by Margarete Sandelowski (2010), Cheryl Tatano Beck (2021), and Creswell and Poth (2018). This approach was selected to generate a clear, practice-oriented account of how soft skills development is conceptualized and implemented within Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia. Unlike grounded theory or phenomenological designs, qualitative description enables findings to remain close to participants' perspectives while producing results that are directly applicable to educational policy and institutional practice.

The design is particularly appropriate given the contextual, organizational, and value-based nature of soft skills development in PTKI, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures. It allows for a holistic yet analytically focused exploration of institutional practices and pedagogical strategies within Islamic higher education.

Analytical Focus

Soft skills development is examined through interrelated analytical dimensions, rather than as separate research objectives. These dimensions include: (1) institutional understandings of soft skills; (2) curricular and pedagogical strategies for integration; (3) institutional opportunities supporting implementation; (4) structural and pedagogical challenges; and (5) the role of lecturers as curriculum developers, learning facilitators, and moral role models. Together, these dimensions provide an integrated framework aligned with the research questions.

Participants and Sampling

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 key informants representing 12 PTKIs across Indonesia. One informant was selected from each institution to capture institutional diversity rather than to conduct case-level comparisons. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) holding a leadership or senior academic position (e.g., rector, vice rector, dean, head of institution, or senior lecturer); (2) possessing at least five years of experience in Islamic higher education; and (3) being directly involved in curriculum development, academic management, or student character formation.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, indicated by the repetition of patterns and the absence of substantively new insights in the final interviews. Saturation was assessed iteratively during data analysis, following established qualitative research guidelines (Guest et al., 2006).

Data Collection

Data were obtained through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. An interview guide was developed in alignment with the research questions and relevant literature on soft skills, Islamic education, and higher education pedagogy. The guide consisted of open-ended questions addressing institutional perspectives, implementation strategies, challenges, and lecturer roles.

The interview protocol was pilot-tested with two senior PTKI lecturers not included in the final sample. Revisions were made to improve clarity, sequencing, and sensitivity to power relations, particularly when interviewing institutional leaders. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). The process involved data familiarization, initial coding, theme construction, theme review, and interpretive reporting. Coding was conducted using an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed in advance.

The analysis was conducted manually, enabling close engagement with the data. Analytical rigor was enhanced through continuous comparison across interviews and the use of analytic memos to document coding decisions. Themes were refined to ensure internal coherence and alignment with the study's analytical framework.

Researcher Positionality and Trustworthiness

The study is grounded in an interpretivist epistemological stance, recognizing that meanings related to soft skills development are socially constructed within institutional, cultural, and religious contexts. The researchers' academic background in Islamic education supported contextual interpretation, while reflexive journaling was used to monitor assumptions and minimize bias.

Trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation, comparing perspectives across institutions and academic roles, and member checking, whereby selected participants reviewed preliminary interpretations. An audit trail was maintained to enhance transparency and dependability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. All participants received detailed information regarding the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. Written informed consent was secured, and participant confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. All data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Conceptual Model for Developing Soft Skills in PTKI Students

The findings indicate a shared understanding among institutional leaders and lecturers from various Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia (UIN, IAIN, and STAIN) that soft skills constitute an essential component of student development within PTKI. Across interviews, participants consistently described soft skills as competencies that complement academic knowledge and are necessary for effective social interaction, leadership, and ethical conduct. Several informants expressed the view that academic excellence alone is insufficient if not accompanied by social responsibility and interpersonal capability.

In the PTKI context, informants did not define soft skills solely as functional or social competencies. Instead, they associated soft skills with Islamic moral qualities such as integrity, responsibility, and adab. Participants emphasized that communication skills, collaboration, leadership, and empathy are perceived as expressions of Islamic character rather than as isolated professional attributes. This perspective was evident in repeated references to moral conduct, ethical awareness, and social accountability as integral elements of soft skills development.

Several informants highlighted the importance of grounding soft skills development in Islamic theological and ethical principles. For example, an informant from IAIN Manado stated that soft skills models in PTKI should be based on tauhid and moral accountability, rather than adopting externally developed frameworks without contextual adaptation. Participants frequently referred to values such as trustworthiness (*amanah*), discipline, and social responsibility as foundational elements that differentiate soft skills development in PTKI from approaches commonly associated with secular higher education.

Based on the thematic analysis, a conceptual model of soft skills development in PTKI emerged, consisting of three interrelated dimensions. The first dimension is value internalization, which refers to the consistent incorporation of Islamic values—such as honesty, discipline, empathy, and responsibility into academic routines, classroom interactions, and institutional culture. Informants described this process as occurring through daily academic practices, assessment norms, and lecturer–student interactions rather than through stand-alone courses.

The second dimension is experiential learning, which includes learning activities that provide students with direct social and professional experience. Participants mentioned internships, community service programs, student organizations, and social projects as primary arenas for developing communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving skills. These activities were described as spaces where students encounter real-world challenges that require the application of both technical knowledge and interpersonal competence.

The third dimension is reflective mentoring, characterized by continuous guidance from lecturers through supervision, dialogue, and role modeling. Informants emphasized the role of lecturers not only as instructors but also as mentors who demonstrate ethical behavior and facilitate reflection on students'

experiences. Reflective discussions, feedback sessions, and informal mentoring relationships were identified as mechanisms through which values and soft skills are reinforced.

Participants noted that these three dimensions operate simultaneously and are mutually reinforcing. Value internalization provides an ethical orientation, experiential learning offers practical contexts, and reflective mentoring connects experience with moral reflection. Informants described this integration as contributing to students' ability to balance professional competence with ethical awareness in academic and social settings.

The findings suggest that soft skills development in PTKI is perceived by institutional actors as a relational and value-oriented process. Rather than being implemented through isolated training modules, soft skills are developed through ongoing interactions between curriculum, institutional culture, learning activities, and lecturer engagement. These findings form the empirical basis for the conceptual model of soft skills development in PTKI presented in this study.

Dimensions of Soft Skills in the Context of PTKI

A thematic analysis of interviews with eleven informants produced six main dimensions of soft skills that are considered relevant to the PTKI context, namely: effective communication, teamwork, leadership, critical and creative thinking, ethics and integrity, and self- and time management. These six dimensions are in line with 21st Century Skills Framework developed by the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21) but with a distinctive Islamic emphasis: that every skill must be based on faith and morality. For example, effective communication is defined not only as speaking and writing skills, but also as the ability to interact politely in accordance with the principle of *qaulan ma'rufa* (good speech).

The dimension of teamwork also receives special attention. Informants such as Prof. Nor Hasan (IAIN Madura) and Dr. Agus (IAIN Ternate) assessed that PTKI students often excel in theory but are less accustomed to cross-disciplinary collaborative work. Therefore, student organizations, research groups, and collaborative projects are effective means of fostering social solidarity and negotiation skills. Collaboration here is not merely an academic strategy, but also a form of *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood) that builds a spirit of togetherness and collective responsibility.

Leadership is a prominent dimension, especially in the faculties of *tarbiyah* and teaching. Informants emphasized the importance of developing leaders with prophetic character—those who have vision, empathy, and moral commitment. This leadership model does not merely imitate modern managerial styles but is rooted in the value of *uswah hasanah* (exemplary behavior). Lecturers are required to be inspirational figures who foster students' social awareness, as emphasized by Prof. Syamsul Ma'arif (UIN Walisongo) that "the strength of students' soft skills is born from the atmosphere of exemplary behavior of lecturers."

Meanwhile, the dimensions of ethics and integrity are at the core of all other skills. Without integrity, critical or creative thinking skills will lose their moral direction. Therefore, PTKI has an advantage over general universities because it instills the values of honesty, discipline, and responsibility as part of religious learning. This ethical awareness is the main difference between Islamic-based soft skills and secular soft skills. Thus, the results of this study reinforce the concept of Islamic character soft skills, namely the integration of professional competence and good character.

Strategies for Implementing Soft Skills in PTKI

Field findings indicate that the strategy for developing soft skills in PTKI is carried out through three main channels: curricular, co-curricular, and digital. Curricular integration of soft skills has been carried out through the renewal of the Semester Learning Plan (RPS) in various study programs. Lecturers develop project-based learning and problem-based learning activities so that students are directly involved in real situations that require communication, critical thinking, and collaboration skills. This strategy is in line with the recommendations of Martinez-Avila et al. (2023), which emphasize that experience-based learning is the most effective means of fostering students' soft skills.

From a co-curricular perspective, student organization activities (DEMA, SEMA, UKM, UKK), community service programs (KKN), and internships provide practical opportunities for students to hone their social, managerial, and leadership skills. Informants from IAIN Bone and IAIN Parepare emphasized that committee activities, entrepreneurship training, and social projects strengthen students' sense of responsibility and discipline. The ma'had al-jami'ah program at IAIN Sorong has even become a model for character building that integrates religious values, independence, and social responsibility.

Meanwhile, the digital aspect has emerged as a new trend in soft skills development. The use of technology, e-learning, and digital content creation strengthens students' communication literacy in the global era. Lecturers guide students in creating educational content for da'wah, scientific research, or social campaigns. This approach not only improves digital literacy but also instills awareness of media ethics within the framework of digital Islamic citizenship. This is in line with the results of the study, which shows that flipped learning and gamification can improve teamwork skills and responsibility in an online context.

To sum up, this implementation strategy demonstrates that PTKI has great potential to become a laboratory for developing value-based soft skills. The combination of adaptive curricular activities, character building in ma'had, and the use of digital technology creates a holistic learning ecosystem. The challenge is to maintain continuity and consistency in implementation so that it does not stop at symbolic activities. Institutional policies are needed to strengthen a reflective, innovative, and value-oriented culture as a hallmark of PTKI in the 21st century.

Opportunities and Challenges in Developing Soft Skills for PTKI Students

The results of the study show that opportunities for developing soft skills at PTKI are wide open in line with the national policy of Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) and the trend of collaboration between campuses, the world of work, and the community. Informants mentioned that internships, humanitarian projects, and community service () across institutions provide ample space for students to practice social empathy, cross-cultural communication, and professional adaptation. The spiritual support of Islamic campuses also strengthens the formation of students' integrity and moral awareness. These conditions are distinctive advantages of PTKI compared to general universities.

However, on the other hand, the challenges faced are also significant. Some lecturers and faculty leaders highlighted the academic culture that is still predominantly theoretical and lacks space for reflective practice. Students tend to measure success by their GPA, rather than by improvements in character and social competence. Another challenge comes from limited supporting facilities, such as learning laboratories, faculty-student mentoring systems, and soft skills training for lecturers. This weakens the effectiveness of student character development, which should be planned and measurable.

In addition to institutional factors, a major challenge arises from the influence of social media and digital technology, which often weakens students' discipline in learning. Prof. Rusydi (IAIN Sorong) highlighted the phenomenon of using AI and copy-paste in academic assignments, which reduces students' moral responsibility. This condition shows that soft skills education in PTKI cannot be separated from ethical digital literacy. Students must be taught to use technology wisely, not merely as consumers, but as productive and ethical users.

Despite various obstacles, all informants are optimistic that PTKI has a strong foundation for developing students' soft skills through the synergy of Islamic values and 21st-century skills. This great potential will be realized if the strengthening of academic culture is accompanied by pedagogical reform and sustainable institutional policies. Several informants described soft skills as an increasingly central component of educational practice within PTKI. Rather than being perceived as additional or supplementary elements of the curriculum, soft skills were commonly portrayed by participants as closely intertwined with core learning activities and institutional educational goals. Informants emphasized that competencies such as communication, collaboration, ethical responsibility, and social awareness are understood as inseparable from academic learning in the PTKI context.

Participants further associated soft skills with the integration of knowledge, moral values, and social responsibility. In their accounts, soft skills were not discussed as stand-alone competencies, but as capacities that develop alongside disciplinary knowledge and moral formation. This perspective was reflected in statements highlighting the role of soft skills in shaping students' interpersonal conduct, ethical judgment, and engagement with society, all of which informants regarded as important outcomes of Islamic higher education.

The Role of Lecturers as a Determining Factor

All informants emphasized that lecturers are key actors in the successful development of PTKI students' soft skills. Lecturers not only function as conveyors of knowledge but also as role models who reflect Islamic values in academic and social behavior. Lecturers' exemplary behavior, humility, discipline, and manner of interaction are part of a strong hidden curriculum. As stated by Prof. Yani Suryani (UIN Sunan Gunung Djati), "what lecturers say is knowledge, but what lecturers do is education." This statement emphasizes that the moral dimension of soft skills is learned more through interaction and exemplary behavior than through theory.

The role of lecturers is also evident in their function as facilitators of active learning. Lecturers who use a student-centered learning approach tend to be more successful in fostering students' communication, collaboration, and critical reflection skills. Through methods such as discussion, peer assessment, and case studies, students learn to express their opinions ethically and listen to others' views with empathy. This approach is in line with Robles' view of soft skills as "interpersonal attributes that enable individuals to interact effectively and harmoniously with others" (Robles, 2012), which emphasizes that effective soft skills learning must be grounded in human interaction, communication, and social engagement rather than merely in the transmission of knowledge.

Lecturers at PTKI also serve as mentors and spiritual guides. They not only facilitate academic activities but also guide students in their personal and moral journeys. The academic mentoring system implemented in several campuses, such as IAIN Ponorogo and UIN Walisongo, has proven effective in strengthening students' discipline, ethics, and motivation to learn. Through humanistic mentoring relationships, lecturers can instill values of responsibility, respect, and social awareness in students towards the surrounding community.

Thus, the results of this study reinforce the view that lecturers are the center of pedagogical change in PTKI. They are not only teachers but also "soul shapers." In the Islamic context, the function of lecturers is similar to the roles of murabbi (educator), mu'allim (teacher), and muaddib (moral educator). These three functions must be revived so that PTKI can produce graduates who are intellectually superior and have noble character. Therefore, the biggest investment in developing the soft skills of PTKI students is not only in facilities but also in the quality of the lecturers' personalities and moral integrity.

Discussion: Integration of Islamic Values and 21st Century Competencies in Religious Higher Education

The findings indicate that participants consistently associated students' soft skills development in PTKI with efforts to integrate Islamic values and competencies commonly linked to twenty-first-century learning. Informants described this integration as occurring through learning practices that simultaneously address academic understanding, ethical awareness, and social responsibility. In their accounts, Islamic education was not framed solely as the

transmission of disciplinary knowledge, but as a process through which values are enacted and reflected in students' reasoning, attitudes, and actions.

Participants frequently emphasized moral qualities such as trustworthiness, honesty, and responsibility as foundational elements that support the development of higher-order competencies, including critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication. From the perspectives of the informants, these values function as guiding orientations that shape how students engage with academic tasks and social interactions. This interpretation aligns with prior studies that highlight the relevance of integrating spiritual and ethical dimensions into contemporary skill development frameworks (Al-Attas, 1980; Abdullah, 2014; Ratnawati, 2023; Holik et al., 2025), without positioning such integration as a prescriptive or universal educational claim.

Interview data indicate that informants did not describe soft skills and academic knowledge as separate or opposing domains. Instead, participants consistently referred to soft skills as developing alongside disciplinary knowledge within learning activities, institutional culture, and lecturer–student interactions. In their accounts, moral values, social competence, and intellectual development were portrayed as interconnected elements of the educational process in PTKI, rather than as distinct or competing components.

This perspective was reflected in informants' descriptions of teaching practices, curriculum design, and student engagement, where ethical conduct, collaboration, and critical reflection were embedded within academic learning contexts. The findings therefore suggest that, from the participants' viewpoints, soft skills development is understood as part of an integrated educational process rather than as an additional or separate instructional focus.

In the context of PTKI, religious knowledge and applied knowledge must work synergistically under the paradigm of tawhidi epistemology. Lecturers and faculty leaders emphasize the importance of unity of knowledge as the foundation for building Islamic academic character (Aziz et al., 2024). Islamic values integrated with a modern approach have also been proven to strengthen students' social skills and work ethics (Hussein, 2024). Thus, soft skills in PTKI are not merely a means to employment, but also an instrument of tazkiyat al-nafs (purification of the self) and the actualization of divine values in social life.

The integration of these values has significant theoretical implications for the development of a contemporary Islamic education paradigm. It affirms that soft skills can be positioned as a modern expression of akhlaq al-karimah. Islamic education, as emphasized by (Ouariach & Ouariach, 2025), must connect global competencies with moral awareness and social significance. This concept is also reinforced by Hamzah's research (2025), which found that value-based and empathy-based learning improves students' adaptability and responsibility in the workplace.

Thus, the findings of this study broaden the understanding of Islamic education as value-based transformative education (Feraco et al., 2023). This paradigm places education not only as a transmission of knowledge but also as a transformation of consciousness. Islamic value-based soft skills combine

spirituality, humanity, and professionalism as an integral whole in preparing PTKI graduates who are relevant in the Society 5.0 era.

Epistemological Construction of Soft Skills in the Perspective of Islamic Education Epistemologically

The results of the study show that soft skills in PTKI are built on three main pillars: spirituality (faith and piety), sociality (ukhuwah and leadership), and rationality ('aql and critical thinking). These pillars form an epistemic framework that differs from the secular concept of soft skills, which is oriented towards industrial efficiency and productivity. This concept is in line with Karimova's (2025) thinking, which states that moral wisdom-based learning fosters students' communication and ethical reflection skills.

This finding also reinforces Heckman and Kautz's (2012) idea that soft skills are a determining factor in human success. However, in the Islamic context, success is not only measured through socio-emotional indicators but also spiritual ones. This approach is similar to the results of research (Amar, 2024), which found that spirituality-based training strengthens self-regulation and emotional resilience in Islamic education students. Thus, soft skills in PTKI can be understood as Islamic soft skills epistemology—that is, the concept of skills that are inseparable from divine values and Qur'anic morality.

This epistemology places soft skills as a manifestation of wisdom, namely the ability to manage knowledge and emotions in accordance with divine guidance. In this context, critical thinking is not interpreted as extreme skepticism, but rather as ethical rational reflection (Holik et al., 2025). This approach is also supported by research (Xu et al., 2024) which confirms that moral awareness and cross-cultural empathy are determining factors for the success of international students in Islamic higher education.

Thus, the epistemology of soft skills in Islamic education serves as a bridge between *hablun minallah* and *hablun minannas*. It integrates the pursuit of knowledge with self-purification and social responsibility (Ramli et al., 2025), (2025). PTKI therefore has a strategic role as a laboratory for forming a balance between worldly and spiritual competencies in the context of global education.

The Role of Lecturers as Mediators of Character and Value Transformation

The findings of this study show that lecturers have a central role in the transformation of students' values and character. In the tradition of Islamic education, lecturers act as *murabbi*, *mu'allim*, and *muaddib*, namely mentors who instill manners and divine values (Tihul et al., 2025). This function is in line with the results of research (Sulistyanto, 2025), which confirms that lecturer involvement in student organization development significantly increases student confidence, responsibility, and leadership.

Faculty members who apply a student-centered learning approach have also been proven to be more effective in developing soft skills. Research by Hussein (2024) and Hamzah (2025) shows that collaborative and reflective learning methods encourage students to become independent learners who are

able to think critically and ethically. In the context of PTKI, this method creates synergy between intellectual independence and spiritual maturity, as found by Rekan et al. (2025). Additionally, faculty role modeling possesses its own pedagogical power. Research (Ratnawati, 2023) confirms that faculty behavior consistent with Islamic values is the most effective hidden curriculum in shaping student character. In line with the concept of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and the results of the study (Feraco et al., 2023), experience-based learning and self-reflection enable students to learn not only "about" values but also "through" values.

Thus, the role of lecturers at PTKI can be seen as a moral bridge between the academic system and the formation of students' spirituality. Lecturers are not only teachers, but also bearers of a moral mission that makes education a means of *tahdzīb al-akhlaq* (perfection of character). This role is relevant to the direction of PTKI's transformation into an institution that produces civilized individuals who are adaptive to global changes.

Structural and Cultural Challenges in the Implementation of Soft Skills

Although opportunities for developing soft skills at PTKI are wide open, this study also found structural and cultural barriers. The PTKI curriculum still emphasizes cognitive achievement, while affective aspects have not been systematically measured. This condition is in line with the findings of , which states that many universities still lack evaluation instruments for soft skills.

Cultural challenges also arise from student behavior in the digital age. Informants highlighted a decline in the learning ethos due to dependence on technology, including the use of artificial intelligence without ethical responsibility. This phenomenon is reinforced by a study (Amar, 2024), which underlines the need for ethical digital literacy in Islamic education. Similar results were also found by Ramli et al. (2025), that the integration of local wisdom in learning can be a moral filter against the flow of digital information.

The resource gap between Islamic higher education institutions is another obstacle. Large Islamic higher education institutions such as UIN Jakarta and Walisongo already have centers for character education, while regional campuses still depend on the initiatives of individual lecturers. Research by Hamzah(2025) and Sulistyanto (2025) emphasizes the need for institutional policies that standardize student character building based on Islamic values so that it is not carried out partially. Therefore, institutional and pedagogical reforms are needed that place character and spirituality education at the core of PTKI's vision. This transformation can only occur if soft skills are positioned as the core of the curriculum and not as a supplement (Holik et al., 2025).

Theoretical and Practical Implications: Toward a Holistic Islamic Education

Model The findings of this study have broad theoretical and practical implications for the development of a holistic Islamic education paradigm. Theoretically, the resulting model reinforces the direction of transdisciplinary education that integrates religion, society, and technology (Ramli et al., 2025).

This model is in line with the concept of Islamic transformative pedagogy, which emphasizes a balance between knowledge, faith, and action (Aziz et al., 2024) ; (Ratnawati, 2023). Practically, this research offers a Soft Skills Development for Islamic Higher Education (SSDIHE) framework that includes four core elements: integration of Islamic values, experiential learning, role-modeling, and ethical digital literacy (Rekan et al., 2025) . This framework is also relevant to the findings of the study (Feraco et al., 2023), which emphasizes the importance of participatory curriculum design in fostering students' ethical awareness.

The policy implications of these findings are that PTKI and the Ministry of Religious Affairs need to prepare contextual and measurable soft skills evaluation indicators (Holik et al., 2025) . The assessment system must include social, ethical, and spiritual dimensions, not just cognitive aspects.

Finally, this study emphasizes that the development of soft skills based on Islamic values is the path to education for humanity. It places humans as moral subjects who play an active role in building civilization (Ramli et al., 2025) . Islamic higher education thus has strategic potential as a pioneer of values education in the era of global technological disruption.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the development of *soft skills* in Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) is a strategic and urgent need in responding to the challenges of globalization, digital disruption, and character crisis in the world of education. Based on interviews with leaders and lecturers from various PTKI in Indonesia, it was found that *soft skills* are not only interpreted as social, communication, and leadership skills, but also as a reflection of the integration of Islamic values in all dimensions of education. PTKI students are expected to become individuals who are not only intellectually superior, but also possess spiritual, moral, and social skills that foster sensitivity towards humanity.

First, conceptually, the model for developing soft skills among PTKI students is based on the integration of Islamic values and 21st Century Skills. Islamic values such as trustworthiness, manners, honesty, discipline, and responsibility form the basis of ethics that are integrated with critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, communication, and digital literacy skills. This integration results in a new paradigm of holistic Islamic education—connecting the spiritual dimension (*hablun minallah*) with social responsibility (*hablun minannas*). This model differs from the secular approach that places soft skills as a utilitarian instrument; in the Islamic context, it becomes part of the formation of *insan kāmīl*, civilized humans who contribute to civilization.

Second, in practical terms, the development of PTKI students' soft skills is carried out through three main strategies: integration into the curriculum through active learning such as project-based learning and problem-based learning; strengthening co-curricular activities such as community service programs, internships, and student organizations as value laboratories; and utilizing digital technology to build communication literacy, innovation, and

creative da'wah based on ethics. The integration of these academic, social, and spiritual dimensions forms a dynamic and value-oriented learning ecosystem.

Third, institutionally, the success of soft skills development greatly depends on the role of lecturers as catalysts for value transformation. Lecturers act not only as educators and facilitators, but also as role models who instill character through exemplary behavior and spiritual guidance. The educational process at PTKI thus does not stop at the transfer of knowledge, but becomes a process of forming moral consciousness and intellectual spirituality.

Fourth, this study also found a number of significant challenges: a curriculum orientation that is still theoretical, a lack of character development facilities, resistance to active learning, and the negative influence of digital media on student discipline and academic responsibility. However, these challenges also open up opportunities for PTKI to innovate in developing value-driven education policies and learning models. The Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy and the trend of industry- social collaboration provide strategic opportunities to strengthen the development of contextual and spiritual soft skills.

Finally, theoretically, this study contributes to the development of a contemporary Islamic education paradigm by introducing the Soft Skills Development for Islamic Higher Education (SSDIHE) model. This model places soft skills development not merely as a complement, but as the core of Islamic education that fosters a balance between knowledge, faith, and practice. By integrating spirituality, technology, and social competence, this model strengthens the role of PTKI as a center for shaping a generation of Muslims who are superior, moderate, globally competitive, and have good character.

Implications

Theoretically, this research expands the paradigm of Islamic education towards a *value-based and holistic education* model that integrates spirituality and 21st-century skills. The resulting conceptual *model—Soft Skills Development for Islamic Higher Education (SSDIHE)*—is an important contribution to the discourse on the " " of contemporary Islamic education. In practical terms, the results of this study encourage Islamic higher education institutions to strengthen value-based curricula, expand *experiential learning*, and build a collaborative and reflective academic culture. Lecturers need to be trained in *soft skills* pedagogy in order to foster students' interpersonal skills, digital ethics, and leadership. In terms of policy, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and PTKI quality assurance institutions need to develop measurable and contextual *soft skills* evaluation instruments based on Islamic values. This approach will ensure that strengthening students' character, spirituality, and professionalism becomes an integral part of the quality of Islamic higher education in Indonesia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all individuals and institutions who have contributed to the completion of this study. Special

appreciation is extended to the leaders and lecturers of Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) across Indonesia who generously shared their time, insights, and experiences during the data collection process. Their valuable perspectives were fundamental in shaping the empirical findings of this research and in developing the proposed SSDIHE model.

The authors also acknowledge the institutional support provided by Kendari State Islamic Institute (IAIN Kendari) and Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari, which facilitated the research process both administratively and academically. The encouragement and academic environment within these institutions have significantly contributed to the completion of this work. In addition, the authors express their deep appreciation to colleagues, peer reviewers, and academic partners who provided constructive feedback, critical insights, and intellectual support throughout the research and writing process. Their contributions have helped refine the analytical framework and strengthen the academic rigor of this study. Finally, the authors are grateful to all parties, directly or indirectly, who have supported this research. It is hoped that this study will contribute meaningfully to the development of value-based soft skills education in Islamic higher education and inspire further research in the field.

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