

Opportunities and Challenges of Soft Skills Integration in Islamic Higher Education at IAIN Kendari

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Abstract

The development of soft skills has become a crucial component of contemporary higher education, particularly in preparing graduates for social and professional life. In Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI), soft skills are closely related to employability and the formation of moral character grounded in Islamic values. This study aims to examine opportunities, challenges, and strategies used in PTKI to foster students' soft skills. A qualitative descriptive-analytical approach was employed through interviews, observations, and document analysis involving lecturers, leaders, and students from several PTKI, including IAIN Kendari, Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari, IAIN Madura, UIN Datokarama Palu, IAIN Pare-Pare, and IAIN Bone. Findings show that soft skills are developed through classroom discussions, presentations, project-based learning, student organizations, and community service. However, these efforts are not systematically integrated into the curriculum, and assessments still prioritize cognitive outcomes. Strengthening digital learning integration and Islamic values offers opportunities for more holistic PTKI education.

Keywords: Soft Skills Integration; Curriculum of Islamic; Colleges;

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INTRODUCTION

The Industrial Revolution 4.0, digital transformation, and the changing nature of a knowledge-based society have all changed the way higher education works. It is no longer just about mastering academic skills; it is also about developing non-cognitive skills, or soft skills. Several international reports demonstrate that the employability of college graduates is significantly affected by their communication skills, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving abilities, creativity, and moral integrity, (Heckman et al., 2017; World et al., 2020). In the realm of Islamic higher education, the cultivation of soft skills is gaining significance, as universities serve not only as venues for knowledge dissemination but also as establishments for character development and the instillation of Islamic ethical values pertinent to contemporary social life, (Azra & A, 2019). Consequently, the cultivation of soft skills among students at Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) represents a significant phenomenon that necessitates academic investigation and scholarly dissemination.

This phenomenon is particularly significant considering various research findings that reveal a disparity between the academic competencies of college graduates and the requirements of the workforce. Jackson & D., (2016) ; Succi et al., (2020) found that many college graduates have a good understanding of theory, but they don't have the social, leadership, and communication skills that are needed in a professional setting. This scenario is similarly observed in the realm of higher education in developing nations, such as Indonesia, where the educational framework predominantly emphasizes the acquisition of cognitive knowledge over the cultivation of students' comprehensive competencies, (Suleman & F, 2018; Tomlinson & M, 2017). Consequently, the cultivation of soft skills is now regarded not merely as an ancillary facet of higher education, but as a fundamental element of the educational process that influences the caliber of graduates.

In the realm of Islamic higher education, the development of soft skills encompasses a more extensive scope, as it pertains to the amalgamation of professional competencies and spiritual values. Islamic education seeks to cultivate individuals who possess a harmonious integration of intellectual, moral, social, and spiritual dimensions, (Abdullah & A., 2014; Al-Attas et al., 2018). Consequently, the cultivation of soft skills in Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) pertains not only to interpersonal and professional competencies but also includes ethical values, social responsibility, and moral integrity, which are essential attributes of a Muslim scholar. Nonetheless, numerous studies demonstrate that the incorporation of soft skills development into the Islamic higher education curriculum remains inadequate and frequently implicit within the learning process, (Huda et al., 2018; Rahman et al., 2022).

Several prior studies have examined the development of soft skills in higher education from diverse perspectives. Succi et al., (2020) research showed how important it is for university graduates in Europe to develop their soft skills to get jobs. Andrews et al., (2008) found that communication, teamwork, and leadership skills are important skills that employers in many different fields look for. Research conducted by Huda et al., (2018) in the realm of Islamic higher education indicated that the incorporation of Islamic values into the educational process can enhance students' character and soft skills. Nonetheless, most of this research continues to concentrate on conceptual frameworks or overarching assessments of educational programs.

Conversely, research that specifically investigates the structural, pedagogical, and cultural obstacles in cultivating students' soft skills at PTKI remains comparatively scarce. Numerous studies focus on learning models or teaching strategies while neglecting a thorough analysis of institutional dynamics, policy influences, and the lived experiences of students and lecturers in the cultivation of soft skills, (Suleman & F, 2018; Tomlinson & M, 2017). A more thorough comprehension of the determinants affecting the efficacy of soft skills development is essential for devising more impactful and contextually relevant educational policies.

Moreover, prior research predominantly employed a quantitative methodology concentrating on assessing students' skill levels or their perceptions regarding the significance of soft skills. This method gives us useful statistical information, but it doesn't always fully explain how soft skills are developed in everyday teaching. Consequently, qualitative research that investigates experiences and perceptions.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative methodology featuring a descriptive-analytical framework, seeking to comprehensively elucidate the dynamics of soft skills development among students at Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI). The qualitative approach was selected due to the research's emphasis on examining the experiences, perspectives, and actual practices of educational practitioners concerning soft skills development in the higher education context. This methodology enables researchers to gain a thorough understanding of how the learning process, institutional policies, and academic interactions within the PTKI environment foster the

development of students' non-cognitive competencies, including communication skills, leadership, teamwork, responsibility, and academic ethics. The qualitative approach enables researchers to comprehensively and contextually capture empirical reality concerning the challenges and opportunities in the development of students' soft skills.

The data collection was accomplished via comprehensive interviews, observations, and documentation analyses. Interviews were conducted with diverse stakeholders in the Islamic higher education sector involved in the student competency development process. This study included instructors from diverse academic disciplines, such as Science Education, Hadith Interpretation, Arabic Language Education, Learning Evaluation, Mathematics, and Islamic Religious Education (PAI). Additionally, the study included faculty leaders, such as Vice Deans I, II, and III, along with students from various classes. This study garnered a comprehensive institutional perspective on the development of student soft skills across various PTKI (Institute of Islamic Education) contexts in Indonesia, informed by interviews with stakeholders from IAIN Kendari, Muhammadiyah University of Kendari, IAIN Madura, UIN Datokarama Palu, IAIN Pare-Pare, and IAIN Bone. Along with interviews, there were also observations of how students learned in class and what they did to see how soft skills were being developed. In the meantime, a documentation study was done by looking at academic documents like curricula, semester lesson plans, and different student activity programs that were meant to help students build their character and skills.

After getting the data from these different sources, it was put through a series of steps: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction phase, the researcher identified and classified data pertinent to the research focus, specifically concerning the cultivation of student soft skills within PTKI contexts. Next, the data is shown as groups and main ideas that show how institutional policies, learning practices, and student experiences are related to each other when it comes to developing non-cognitive skills. The last step is to draw conclusions by interpreting the research results in order to get a better picture of the problems and chances that come up when trying to improve students' soft skills at Islamic religious higher education institutions. This study employs verification techniques by comparing diverse data sources and cross-referencing information with informants to guarantee that the interpretations correspond with empirical conditions observed in the field.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Integration of Soft Skills Development in the Learning Process at PTKI

Research findings demonstrate that the cultivation of students' soft skills in Islamic Religious Higher Education (PTKI) has become an essential component of everyday educational practices, despite its implementation being implicit and not yet fully integrated into the curriculum. Interviews with lecturers from diverse study programs, including Science Education, Hadith Interpretation, Arabic Language Education, Learning Evaluation, Mathematics, and Islamic Religious Education (PAI), reveal that the enhancement of soft skills is predominantly achieved through active learning strategies, such as group discussions, class presentations, collaborative assignments, and field practice activities. This method encourages students to take an active role in their learning, which helps them learn concepts and improve their communication, teamwork, leadership, and critical thinking skills. In contemporary higher education, active learning methodologies are regarded as an effective means of enhancing students' non-cognitive competencies, as collaborative and reflective learning activities foster the development of interpersonal and problem-solving skills more authentically than passive or lecture-based instruction, (Succi et al., 2020; Suleman & F, 2018).

In the pedagogical approach of PTKI (Institute of Islamic Studies), lecturers have transitioned from being mere purveyors of information to facilitators who cultivate a

participatory and dialogical learning environment. In conceptual courses like tafsir and hadith studies, teachers stress the importance of not only understanding texts and scientific ideas but also getting students involved in analytical discussions, scientific presentations, and dialogue forums that help them build academic arguments. Through this process, students learn how to logically express their opinions, deal with people who disagree with them, and feel more confident about sharing their ideas in public. These activities indirectly foster the enhancement of diverse soft skills, including academic communication proficiency, critical thinking abilities, and mutual respect within scientific discourse. Studies in higher education indicate that learning through dialogue and critical reflection enhances students' capacity to amalgamate conceptual knowledge with communication and analytical skills, thereby equipping them to navigate the complexities of social and professional challenges in the future, (Jackson & D., 2016; Tomlinson & M, 2017). In study programs that focus more on applying what you've learned, like Science and Mathematics Education, soft skills are often developed through project-based learning. In this method, students must work together to solve a school problem or complete a specific learning project. Students learn how to use what they learn in school in real life and how to work as a team, share responsibilities, settle disagreements, and talk to group members in this group work. Project-based learning also gives students chances to improve their problem-solving skills by being creative and coming up with new ideas. Numerous studies have demonstrated that project-based learning is an efficacious educational strategy for enhancing students' collaboration, leadership, and higher-order thinking skills, as this methodology positions students as the principal agents in the pursuit and construction of knowledge, (Maina et al., 2022; Polakova et al., 2023).

This study also discovered that the incorporation of soft skills into the curriculum of Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) has not been systematically and comprehensively structured. Most lecturers acquire these skills organically throughout the learning process, despite the absence of explicit achievement indicators in the curriculum documents or semester lesson plans. This situation shows that the development of soft skills still depends a lot on the efforts of individual teachers and is not yet a standard part of the curriculum design for Islamic higher education. Because of this, soft skills development can be different in different classes and with different teachers, which means that not all students will have the same experience learning these non-cognitive skills. This situation frequently arises in higher education literature when institutions acknowledge the significance of soft skills yet fail to fully incorporate them into a cohesive framework of learning outcomes, pedagogical approaches, and evaluation mechanisms (Panadero, E., Jonsson, A., & Botella, 2017).

More generally, this study's results show that PTKI has a lot of potential to make the development of soft skills a more regular part of the learning process. This is due to the inherently holistic nature of Islamic education, which prioritizes not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the development of character and moral values. Islamic educational traditions teach values like honesty, trustworthiness, responsibility, and social awareness. These values are important for helping students develop their soft skills. Strengthening the integration of soft skills into the curriculum of Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) is pertinent to the contemporary workforce requirements and corresponds with the objectives of Islamic education, which stress a harmonious development of students' intellectual, social, and spiritual dimensions. PTKI could produce graduates who not only have strong academic skills but also social skills, leadership skills, and moral integrity that are important to the needs of the global community if it integrates its curriculum, learning strategies, and evaluation systems in a more organized way.

2. The Role of Institutional Leadership in Developing Student Soft Skills

Research findings indicate that institutional leadership plays a crucial role in creating a higher education ecosystem capable of supporting the sustainable development of students' soft skills. In the context of higher education, faculty leaders—such as the Vice Dean I in charge of academics, the Vice Dean II in charge of administration and resources, and the Vice Dean III in charge of student affairs—hold strategic positions in formulating academic policies and student development programs. Interviews with faculty leaders revealed that various institutional policies have been directed at encouraging the strengthening of non-cognitive competencies through the integration of academic and student activities. These efforts include strengthening student organizations, organizing leadership training, community service programs, and academic activities based on collaboration and active student participation. These policies demonstrate that institutional leadership functions not only as administrators of educational administration but also as directors of an academic culture that shapes student character and competence. Higher education literature confirms that visionary academic leadership plays a crucial role in creating a learning environment that fosters the development of 21st-century skills, including communication, collaboration, creativity, and student leadership.

In practice, faculty leadership policies at various PTKI also strive to utilize student activities as an effective learning platform for developing soft skills. Student organizations, for example, are viewed not merely as supplementary extracurricular activities, but as social learning spaces that enable students to learn leadership, manage conflict, build networks, and communicate effectively with various parties. Furthermore, community service activities, a tradition of higher education in Indonesia, also provide students with opportunities to develop social empathy, collective responsibility, and the ability to work in diverse societal contexts. From a modern higher education perspective, these types of out-of-class learning experiences are often referred to as experiential learning, a learning process that allows students to develop competencies through direct experience in real-world situations. Research on educational leadership shows that institutions that successfully develop student competencies comprehensively generally have academic leadership capable of integrating formal and non-formal learning experiences within a coherent educational ecosystem. Thus, the role of faculty leadership is crucial in ensuring that various student activities are clearly oriented toward student competency development.

In the context of Islamic higher education, the development of soft skills through institutional policies has a broader dimension because it is related to the formation of character and moral values, which are the primary goals of Islamic education. Programs such as student leadership training, campus da'wah activities, community service, and Islamic scientific discussion forums aim not only to improve student organizational skills but also to strengthen the internalization of values such as trustworthiness, responsibility, cooperation, and social concern. These values are an integral part of the concept of Islamic education, which emphasizes a balance between intellectual, spiritual, and social development. Therefore, institutional leadership at Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) is not only tasked with ensuring the effectiveness of academic management but also responsible for building an academic culture grounded in Islamic ethical and moral values. Research on higher education leadership shows that institutional leaders who are able to integrate ethical values into academic policies tend to be more successful in creating a learning environment that supports student character development (Bearman et al., 2017). In this context, academic leadership at Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) has the potential to be a crucial factor in developing a higher education model that is oriented not only toward professional competence but also toward the formation of students' moral and spiritual character.

But research also shows that institutional policies for helping students improve their soft skills still have a lot of structural problems. One of the biggest problems is that there isn't an evaluation system that is specifically designed to track how students' soft skills are growing. Most higher education assessment systems still focus on cognitive skills, which are measured by written tests, schoolwork, or grade point averages. At the same time, academic assessment systems have not yet fully incorporated skills like communication, leadership, teamwork, and social adaptability. Consequently, the academic documentation of students' non-cognitive competency development is frequently lacking, even though these skills are cultivated through diverse learning and organizational activities. Recent studies in higher education demonstrate that the advancement of soft skills necessitates more genuine assessment methodologies, including performance-based evaluations, learning portfolios, and student self-reflection, which can more thoroughly illustrate competency development, (Bond et al., 2020). Without a clear way to measure success, policies for developing soft skills could become standard programs that are hard to judge.

Consequently, the results of this study affirm that institutional leadership at PTKI must formulate more systematic and cohesive policies for the enhancement of students' soft skills. Some of these policies could be making learning goals that clearly include non-cognitive skills, making assessment rubrics that can measure students' interpersonal skills, and adding student activities to the academic recognition system. This way of thinking makes soft skills development an important part of the higher education system that the school has planned for. Over time, institutional leaders who can bring together the curriculum, student activities, and systems for evaluating learning will help make the academic environment more well-rounded. Such an environment will not only produce graduates who are smart, but also those who are good at making friends, leading others, and doing the right thing in a world that is becoming more complicated.

3. Student Experience in Developing Soft Skills

The perspective of the students involved in this research indicates that the learning experience in higher education is shaped not only by academic activities within the classroom but also by various social and organizational experiences occurring in the campus environment. Students from various cohorts indicated that participation in student organizations, scientific discussion forums, and community service programs offers extensive opportunities for the development of various soft skills, including communication, leadership, teamwork, and self-management. Through that experience, students not only learned conceptual knowledge, but also how to express ideas in a systematic way, manage group dynamics, and make decisions in complicated situations. In the context of contemporary higher education, such learning experiences are often regarded as a component of experiential learning, which is a process that prioritizes direct experience as the primary source for the development of students' personal and professional competencies. Several studies indicate that student involvement in organizational activities and campus social events significantly enhances interpersonal communication skills, leadership abilities, and collaborative skills essential for professional and social life, (Chan et al., 2019). In this way, students' involvement in various student activities cannot be seen as just extracurricular activities, but as an important part of the process of developing students' skills in a holistic way.

The findings of this study indicate that the interaction between students and lecturers during the learning process has a highly significant impact on the development of students' interpersonal skills and self-confidence. Students believe that professors who open up space for dialogue give students a chance to talk and encourage them to share their opinions in a critical way can make the classroom a more participatory place to learn. In a dialogical learning situation, students are not just passive recipients of information; they also play an

active role in the process of constructing knowledge. The process enables students to cultivate critical thinking skills, scientific argumentation abilities, and a mutual respect in academic discourse. Conversely, one-way, teacher-centered learning methods tend to limit students' opportunities to improve their communication and intellectual reflection skills. Higher education studies show that a participatory and reflective pedagogical approach can increase student engagement in the learning process and encourage the development of various non-cognitive competencies, including communication skills, adaptability, and self-confidence in conveying ideas (Kahu et al., 2018). Consequently, pedagogical interaction between lecturers and students is a crucial factor in fostering a learning experience that promotes the continuous development of soft skills.

Students also said that activities outside of class, like academic seminars, leadership training, campus outreach activities, and different socio-religious activities, give them important real-world experience that helps them improve their social skills. These activities give students a chance to meet people from different groups in the community, deal with people who have different points of view, and learn how to negotiate and solve problems. In this setting, students learn how to work together in groups, take care of their responsibilities at work, and make new friends. These experiences, frequently inaccessible via formal classroom instruction, are essential for the development of students' professional identities. Studies on the cultivation of 21st-century skills indicate that genuine and contextual learning experiences, including community service, collaborative projects, and organizational activities, are essential in developing students' leadership abilities, social empathy, and adaptability to societal changes, (Bennett et al., 2016). Consequently, student participation in diverse social and organizational activities can be regarded as a learning laboratory that facilitates the enhancement of interpersonal and leadership skills. Within the framework of Islamic Religious Higher Education (PTKI), students' educational experiences encompass academic pursuits, student organizations, and socio-religious activities, possessing a broader significance as they pertain to the internalization of moral and spiritual values. Students learn to communicate and lead others through campus da'wah activities, community service, and other socio-religious activities. They also learn how to put Islamic values like social responsibility, empathy, and concern for the community into action. So, developing soft skills in the PTKI environment is not only about making students better at their jobs, but also about shaping their character and moral integrity. This indicates that the educational experience at PTKI is multifaceted, integrating the enhancement of academic proficiency, social abilities, and Islamic ethical principles. So, the learning experience for students in PTKI can be seen as a whole learning process, where different academic and social activities work together to help students become not only smarter but also more mature in terms of their social and moral behavior.

4. Challenges in Developing Student Soft Skills at PTKI

The difficulties in cultivating students' soft skills at Islamic Religious Colleges (PTKI) are inherently connected to the dynamics of the higher education system, which continues to be characterized by a pedagogical approach centered on the mastery of academic content. This study shows that even though teachers have tried to include different types of learning activities that get students to work together and talk to each other, the learning process is still mostly focused on delivering lecture material in a conceptual way. This orientation is frequently shaped by curriculum requirements that prioritize cognitive achievement and an assessment framework that continues to regard academic exam results as the principal measure of learning success. Because of this, higher education hasn't paid enough attention to non-cognitive skills like communication, teamwork, leadership, and adaptability. Within the realm of global education, numerous studies have indicated that a learning paradigm excessively centered on academic content may impede the cultivation of 21st-century competencies necessitating a balance between cognitive and non-cognitive skills, (Bennett et

al., 2017; Binkley et al., 2018). Consequently, the prevalence of content-centric pedagogies is a structural factor impeding the swift incorporation of soft skills into the higher education framework.

Along with problems with teaching, this study also found problems with learning evaluation systems that weren't made to specifically measure how students' soft skills are improving. In numerous instances, assessment systems in higher education predominantly emphasize cognitive evaluations, including written examinations, individual assignments, and academic presentations, often lacking supplementary indicators that explicitly gauge students' communication skills, teamwork, leadership, or social responsibility. Consequently, despite students participating in diverse collaborative learning activities, the advancement of these non-cognitive competencies is frequently not systematically recorded in the academic evaluation process. In current higher education discourse, this issue is referred to as the disparity between learning experiences and assessment practices, specifically a scenario in which collaborative and reflective learning experiences lack a robust evaluation system to thoroughly assess learning outcomes, (Bearman et al., 2017). Other studies indicate that in the absence of a genuine and organized assessment framework, the cultivation of soft skills is often perceived as an incidental outcome of the educational process, rather than a purposefully established objective (Carless & D, 2019). Consequently, enhancing assessment systems that can more accurately evaluate non-cognitive competencies is an essential prerequisite for higher education reform.

The next challenge has to do with academic culture factors that still affect how teachers and students interact with each other while they are learning. Research data indicates that certain students continue to display a propensity for passivity in classroom discussions, largely attributable to their prior exposure to educational models that emphasized lecturers as the principal purveyors of knowledge. This hierarchical academic relationship often restricts open communication between lecturers and students, resulting in students being less accustomed to articulating critical perspectives or actively participating in the learning process. From a contemporary higher education standpoint, a less participatory academic culture may impede the cultivation of students' communication and collaboration skills, as soft skills are primarily fostered through rigorous social interaction and participatory learning experiences, (Barnett & R, 2020). Changing the culture of higher education is an important step in helping students improve their soft skills.

Additionally, the difficulty of cultivating soft skills in Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) is connected to the necessity for a paradigm shift in education, emphasizing not merely knowledge transfer but also the enhancement of students' comprehensive competencies. In the knowledge society era, higher education needs graduates who not only have strong academic skills but also the ability to adapt to social change, work in teams with people from different fields, and communicate with people from different cultures. For this to happen, schools need to come up with a new way of teaching that encourages students to think critically, reflect on what they've learned, and build a professional identity based on moral values and social responsibility. In the realm of Islamic higher education, this transformation possesses an additional dimension, as the cultivation of soft skills is intrinsically linked to the development of students' character and moral integrity, which are fundamental objectives of Islamic education. To strengthen soft skills in PTKI, it is necessary to reform the curriculum and learning methods, as well as to transform the academic culture to promote a dialogical, collaborative, and reflective learning environment.

The findings of this study reveal that the difficulties in cultivating students' soft skills in PTKI are multifaceted, involving pedagogical dimensions, assessment frameworks, and the transforming academic culture. To improve soft skills in Islamic higher education institutions (PTKI), we need to take a more comprehensive approach. This should include adding non-

cognitive skills to the curriculum, creating more interactive learning methods, and making assessment systems stronger so they can better measure how students' interpersonal skills are improving. With this more integrated approach, PTKI hopes to turn out graduates who are not only good students but also have the social, leadership, and moral skills needed to deal with the growing number of problems in the world.

5. Opportunities for Soft Skills Development in Islamic Higher Education

The cultivation of soft skills in Islamic higher education presents substantial opportunities for enhancement through the incorporation of Islamic values, which have traditionally and philosophically constituted the bedrock of the Islamic education system. Islamic education has always put character development at the center of the learning process. This is different from modern educational methods, which often separate professional competence from moral dimensions. In both classical and modern Islamic educational traditions, the concepts of *tarbiyah*, *ta'dib*, and *tazkiyah* focus on more than just learning; they also focus on building a well-rounded personality that includes intellectual intelligence, emotional maturity, and spiritual depth. Consequently, attributes such as honesty (*sidq*), responsibility (*amanah*), empathy (*rahmah*), and ethical leadership have historically been fundamental to the value system of Islamic education. In the realm of Islamic higher education, the amalgamation of these values offers a strategic opportunity to formulate a model for enhancing soft skills that is not only aligned with workplace requirements but also focused on cultivating student character rooted in ethics and morality. Recent studies indicate that Islamic education incorporating spiritual, ethical, and professional competency dimensions yields graduates with a robust equilibrium between technical proficiency and social character (Halstead & M., 2019; Huda et al., 2018).

Along with a foundation in Islamic values, the growth of digital technology also gives Islamic higher education new ways to help students improve their soft skills. The digital transformation in higher education has led to the development of new learning models that let students work together, talk to each other, and connect with people from all over the world. Students can work together across time and space thanks to online learning platforms, learning management systems, digital discussion forums, and other collaborative tools. This indirectly teaches students how to communicate digitally, work together in a virtual setting, and adapt to changes in technology that happen quickly. Recent studies in higher education indicate that technology-enhanced learning not only enhances access to information but also bolsters students' collaboration, creativity, and digital literacy—crucial soft skills for the 21st century (Bond et al., 2020; Selwyn & N, 2016). Digitalizing education can be a big help for PTKI to make a more dynamic and collaborative learning environment.

Additionally, the incorporation of Islamic values and the utilization of digital technology create opportunities for PTKI (Institute of Islamic Education) to cultivate a more comprehensive educational framework. Holistic education stresses that the goal of learning is not just to improve academic skills, but also to help students grow in a balanced way in their social, emotional, moral, and spiritual areas. From an Islamic educational standpoint, this comprehensive approach is significantly pertinent, as the Islamic conception of humans encompasses integrated physical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. So, the development of soft skills in PTKI shouldn't be seen as an extra part of the academic curriculum. Instead, it should be seen as an important part of the process of helping students grow into well-rounded people. There are many ways to make this educational model work, such as adding values-based learning, making student activities stronger, and creating learning experiences that get students involved in their communities. This method enhances students' interpersonal skills while promoting social consciousness and ethical accountability within the community, (Ahmed & A, 2017; Zarkasyi et al., 2020).

As the world changes socially due to new technologies, more people moving between countries for work, and social issues becoming more complicated, university graduates need to have skills that are not only technical but also flexible, cooperative, and moral. In this context, Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) have a significant opportunity to play a strategic role in building a higher education paradigm that integrates professional competencies with moral and spiritual values. Islamic higher education that can teach soft skills based on values will produce graduates who not only have strong academic skills but also have moral integrity, good communication skills, and a good understanding of social issues. So, improving soft skills in Islamic higher education could be a very important way to raise a generation of Muslim intellectuals who can make positive contributions to social, economic, and cultural life in the modern world. By taking advantage of the chances to combine Islamic values with digital transformation in education, PTKI could become a model for higher education that meets the needs of the modern workplace and helps build a civilized and moral society.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that the cultivation of students' soft skills at Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) is a crucial aspect of the higher education process, intrinsically linked to the primary objective of Islamic education: the development of individuals who are intellectually, morally, socially, and spiritually well-rounded. Interviews with lecturers, faculty leaders, and students from IAIN Kendari, Muhammadiyah University of Kendari, IAIN Madura, UIN Datokarama Palu, IAIN Pare-Pare, and IAIN Bone revealed that the enhancement of soft skills has occurred through diverse learning and student activities. Group discussions, presentations, collaborative assignments, and project-based learning are all ways for students to improve their communication skills, teamwork, leadership, and critical thinking. Also, getting involved in student groups, academic seminars, and community service programs is a great way for students to learn how to get along with others, be responsible, and be flexible in different social situations. In Islamic higher education, the cultivation of soft skills occurs not solely in formal classrooms but also through social, contextual, and reflective learning experiences within the academic milieu of the campus.

This study also showed that Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) still have a lot of work to do when it comes to developing soft skills. This is especially true when it comes to integrating soft skills into the curriculum and learning evaluation systems that still focus on cognitive aspects. Enhancing students' non-cognitive skills frequently depends on the initiative of lecturers and lacks comprehensive backing from a structured institutional policy framework. This study also found strategic chances that PTKI can take advantage of, especially by using digital technology in learning and adding Islamic values to the educational process. Honesty, trustworthiness, empathy, social responsibility, and ethical leadership are core values of Islamic educational tradition that are very relevant to the idea of soft skills in modern higher education. By combining these values with new teaching methods and digital changes in learning, PTKI has a lot of potential to create a more complete model of higher education. This model would not only produce graduates with academic excellence, but also with moral integrity, good communication skills, and a strong sense of social responsibility to deal with the challenges of modern life.

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