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TOWARD SUSTAINABLE HIGHER EDUCATION: INTEGRATING SOFT SKILL DEVELOPMENT INTO BUSINESS SCHOOL CURRICULUM IN INDONESIA

ᵃ **Noveri Maulana**

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Developing soft skills is a crucial component of the business school curriculum. Business schools are better positioned to generate well-rounded and competitive graduates who can better negotiate the intricacies of the business world if they include the development of soft skills in their curriculum. This study is aimed at exploring this topic.

Theoretical Reference: This study supports the concept of integrative curriculum between hard-skill and soft-skill implementation in higher education. This qualitative study will analyze the different points of view between three approaches of soft-skill curriculum implementation theory in the literature: stand-alone, embedded, and combination.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This study applies a case study approach that elaborates on applying a soft-skill curriculum in the first business school in Indonesia. Data were collected through focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and in-person observation.

Results and Conclusion: The result shows that the implementation of soft skill development in this business school uses a stand-alone approach rather than an embedded method. Those stand-alone soft-skill subjects are divided into four soft-skill courses: Self Development Course, Team Development Course, Community Development Course, and Internship Program. This curriculum has been implemented for years and is still valuable and beneficial to the students in the current context. This method has some beneficial practical implementations as well as challenges.

Implications of Research: This paper proposes a novel approach to implementing the 'stand-alone' soft-skill curriculum in higher education. Based on the qualitative analysis of this case study, the four courses approach can also be implemented in other higher institutions in different educational contexts.

Originality/Value: The originality of this paper is the new approach to the soft-skill curriculum, which still needs to be elaborated in the previous literature. The finding of this study could enhance the implementation strategy of soft-skill curricula in business schools and other higher education institutions.

Keywords: soft-skill, business school, curriculum, higher education, sustainable education.

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EM DIREÇÃO A UMA EDUCAÇÃO SUPERIOR SUSTENTÁVEL: INTEGRANDO O DESENVOLVIMENTO DE HABILIDADES LEVES NO CURRÍCULO DA ESCOLA DE NEGÓCIOS NA INDONÉSIA

RESUMO

Objetivo: O desenvolvimento de competências sociais é um componente crucial do currículo escolar de negócios. As escolas de negócios estão mais bem posicionadas para gerar graduados bem-arredondados e competitivos que podem negociar melhor as complexidades do mundo dos negócios se incluírem o desenvolvimento de habilidades sociais em seu currículo. O objetivo do presente estudo é explorar este tema.

Referência Teórica: Este estudo apoia o conceito de currículo integrativo entre a implementação de habilidades físicas e técnicas no ensino superior. Este estudo qualitativo analisará os diferentes pontos de vista entre as três abordagens da teoria da implementação de currículo de habilidades flexíveis na literatura: autônomo, embutido e combinação.

Design/Metodologia/Abordagem: Este estudo aplica uma abordagem de estudo de caso que elabora a aplicação de um currículo de habilidades sociais na primeira escola de negócios na Indonésia. Os dados foram coletados por meio de discussões em grupo focal, entrevistas aprofundadas e observação presencial.

Resultados e Conclusão: O resultado mostra que a implementação do desenvolvimento de habilidades interativas nesta escola de negócios usa uma abordagem independente em vez de um método incorporado. Essas disciplinas autônomas de soft-skill são divididas em quatro cursos de soft-skill: Self Development Course, Team Development Course, Community Development Course e Internship Program. Este currículo foi implementado por anos e ainda é valioso e benéfico para os alunos no contexto atual. Este método tem algumas implementações práticas benéficas, bem como desafios.

Implicações da investigação: O presente documento propõe uma nova abordagem para a aplicação do currículo de competências flexíveis "autônomo" no ensino superior. Com base na análise qualitativa deste estudo de caso, a abordagem dos quatro cursos também pode ser implementada em outras instituições superiores em diferentes contextos educacionais.

Originalidade/valor: A originalidade deste artigo é a nova abordagem ao currículo de habilidades técnicas, que ainda precisa ser elaborada na literatura anterior. A conclusão deste estudo poderá melhorar a estratégia de implementação de currículos de competências transversais em escolas de negócios e outras instituições de ensino superior.

Palavras-chave: competências, escola de negócios, currículo, ensino superior, educação sustentável.

1 INTRODUCTION

Soft skill development in higher education is still challenging. Today work performance influences many changes in knowledge, skills, and attitudes that may contribute to satisfying successful performance. Employers are more concerned with mastery of soft skills than conventional attitudes stressing technical talents (Holtom et al., 2006). Students must acquire soft skills to excel in employment and become well-rounded (Khairiah et al., 2023). However, there is frequently a discrepancy between the skills

students acquire through their academic studies and the skills employers require (Dewiyani, 2015). To close this gap, higher education institutions can create a soft skills curriculum to assist students in developing the abilities required for a successful career in the workforce.

Several studies have found that generic skills like communication, problem-solving, and teamwork are increasingly crucial for effective performance (Emanuel et al., 2021). In a larger sense, soft skill development is crucial and necessary because it requires the nation to envision vision and mission through skilled people capital. A nation will be better with excellent human capital since no human component can embark on new projects and ideas. Hence, the educational sector must support the industry's need for sound human capital to 'produce' high-quality human capital. As one of the resource producers for good human capital for the industry, the business school shall optimize the development of the soft skills of its bachelor.

In Indonesia, the Ministry of Higher Education has stated that the output of the education system shall meet four levels of learning outcomes: Knowledge, Attitude, General Skills, and Specialized Skills. In the learning outcome, the government already developed Attitudes and General Skills into standardized outcomes, which has been stated nationally (SN DIKTI, 2014). Nevertheless, on the other hand, Knowledge and Specialized Skills could be developed by higher education, professional and practitioner's association, an expert from industry, and the board of experts in the field of knowledge (Maulana & Intan Pesona, 2021). This is where the university could have its customized approach to developing its own soft skills curriculum.

Based on that argumentation, this study is aimed to analyze the implementation of the soft skill curriculum at the PPM School of Management (PPM SoM), the first business school in Indonesia since 1967. As one of the leading business schools in Indonesia, PPM SoM has developed its soft skill curriculum since decades ago. Established in 1967, PPM first organized the MBA program, which focused on developing hard and soft skill competencies in its integrative curriculum for young managers in Indonesia. When the Bachelor program was developed in 2005, the MBA soft skill curriculum was adopted to develop the curriculum for undergraduate student.

Therefore, implementing a soft skill curriculum in the PPM School of Management already focuses on developing hard and soft skill competencies, as the Ministry of Higher Education stated in Indonesia's National Standard of Higher Education

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(SN DIKTI). Soft skill development in the PPM School of Management is one of the few examples of implementing an integrative curriculum in a business school in Indonesia. This study will elaborate and analyze the detail of the curriculum implementation.

2 THEORETICAL REFERENCE

Technical or specialized knowledge, such as typing, writing, mathematics, reading, language abilities, and the ability to operate software, are examples of hard skills; they are relatively easy to see, assess, and learn. Soft skills are intra and interpersonal socio-emotive abilities crucial for personal growth, social involvement, and professional and academic success, as opposed to hard skills, which are about the capacity to accomplish a particular task or activity. They are called skills because they can be taught and improved through specialized training. Because they are applicable in any context, soft skills, also known as transversal competencies, are person-related rather than task-specific. Soft skills enable certain professional behaviors and are crucial to skill transferability across activities. (Emanuel et al., 2021).

Soft skills are personal characteristics, qualities, and habits that enable a person to engage effectively with others and navigate social situations. These abilities are sometimes elusive and difficult to quantify, yet they are critical for business and life success. Soft skills include communication, teamwork, leadership, flexibility, problem-solving, time management, emotional intelligence, and creativity. While technical skills and knowledge are essential, employers frequently value soft skills equally or even more highly when hiring. They are necessary for building relationships and effectively collaborating with others.

Implementing a soft skills curriculum at higher education institutions is critical for assisting students in developing the abilities required to thrive in the workforce. Institutions can ensure that their graduates are well-prepared for career success by identifying the essential soft skills, incorporating them into existing courses, offering dedicated soft skills courses, providing experiential learning opportunities, providing feedback and assessment, and collaborating with employers.

Soft skills may be embedded or integrated into the curriculum by providing activities that instil responsibility (Klimovskikh et al., 2023). They do, however, need particular abilities in order to reach their learning goals. Sisson and Adams (2013) recommended soft skill integration in the curriculum through case studies, problem-based

learning, or real-world simulation activities that necessitate student engagement. Based on their experimental study among hospitality students, the results indicate that learning programs should stress teaching hospitality students soft competencies in favor of complex competencies (Sisson & Adams, 2013). Conversely, Kerby and Romine (2010) advocated for course-embedded curriculum designs and evaluations in accounting to improve students' oral presentation abilities. This is intended to improve student's communication skills, exceptionally verbal communication (Kerby & Romine, 2009). Other methods for improving students' oral presentation skills include embedding actions or practical learning through the 'Questioning Insight' technique or incorporating other practical approaches into lessons (Tan et al., 2021).

Ngang (2011), in his research based in Malaysia stated that there are three ways to implement soft skill development in higher education. First, through 'Stand Alone Subject', where the soft skill development is taught in specific courses. For instance, a student pursuing an education program must take minor business management or mass communication courses. The second is through an 'embedded program' in other courses. This embedded model embeds soft skills in the teaching and learning activities across the curriculum. It does not require the student to take special courses as in the stand-alone subject model. And third, is through a 'combination' between stand-alone and embedded model (Ngang, 2011).

3 METHOD

This research describes the implementation of the Soft Skill Curriculum at PPM SoM, one of the leading business schools in Indonesia. The research also developed to describe the implementation of soft skill development based on the three approaches stated by Ngang (2008) above. By implementing the qualitative methodology, the study is implementing a case study approach to analyze the findings in the deductive concept. The qualitative method is a research procedure that obtains descriptive data in written or spoken words from the people and their behavior, which is being observed (Huberman & Miles, 2012; Maulana, 2020).

Several research techniques were implemented in this study based on the research process design. First is the literature review process to better understand the research context and problems. The second process is the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with students to elaborate on their experiences participating in the soft skill development

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curriculum in PPM SoM. This process will help the validity and reliability analysis regarding the soft skill theoretical framework. The third process is the in-depth interview with the deputy dean and soft-skill mentor to explore a deeper understanding of the soft-skill curriculum implementation at PPM SoM. The fourth process is observation through the practical implementation of the curriculum. The author participated as a soft-skill development mentor for a semester to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. Therefore the conclusion will be valid and reliable for a generalization (Sekaran & Bougie, 2011).

Literature review is a process where researchers conduct the contrast and compare previous research studies to the research topic and problem statement which a researchers is willing to explore (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008). This process needs good analytical thinking and a continuous process of contrasting and comparing the related previous kinds of literature. This study compares several conceptual papers and empirical studies from national and international literature published in academic journals to build a deeper understanding of soft-skill curricula in various research contexts.

Focus group discussion collects information and common opinions among the group or communities (Tri & Hoa, 2023). Through FGD, researchers could analyse the communal perception of a group of respondents toward some idea or topics of research (Lockyer, 2005). Moreover, FGD could also be used to explain the results or confirm the result of the research study. In this research, the author conducts an FGD with three students from different study levels (second year, final year, and fresh graduate).

Meanwhile, an in-depth interview explores other people's opinions and perspectives in an explorative technique. An in-depth interview is often used in the qualitative method. When conducting the in-depth interview, researchers usually implement face-to-face meeting with the respondent (Ranney et al., 2015). With technology's support, in-depth interviews will also be conducted using online meeting technology. In this study, the author conducts three in-depth interviews with the deputy dean, senior lecturer, and soft-skill development mentor at the PPM School of Management.

Lastly, this study also implements field observation as the last data collection method. Observation is the selection and recording of behaviours of people in their environment. This method is helpful in generating in-depth descriptions of organizations or events, for obtaining information that is otherwise inaccessible and for conducting

research when other methods are inadequate (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). In this research, observation was conducted through soft-skill mentoring sessions where the author participated as one of the mentors. The observation aims to analyse the informants' behaviour on their understanding and implementation of the soft-skill curriculum. The result of observation will ensure the validity of the data collected in various research methods.

A content analysis method is implemented in the context of data analysis and result formulation. Content analysis is a method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Chen et al., 2020). Once the narrative data was collected through the methods as mentioned earlier, the authors categorized the codes into several classifications for deeper content analysis based on specific topics. For the example, based on the study purpose, the study conclusion will be categorized into three section which are curriculum exploration, benefit of soft-skill curriculum, and challenges on implementing soft skill curriculum. Hence, the authors will extract each code and topic from the verbatim of interview and FGD, and it will be categorized into those three final categories. The word "enjoying class", "good attitude", "appreciate the courses" are example of the codes from interview regarding curriculum implementation. Hence, based on the sentiment of each word, those word-codes will be categorized into benefit of soft skill curriculum in the higher university.

4 RESULTS

The study applies several data collection approaches to ensure the validity and reliability of the qualitative method. The data from the interview and FGD will be triangulated with the data from in-person observation by the author. Hence, the data analysis process was conducted using the content analysis technique (Chen et al., 2020). Thus, to present a clear purpose of the research questions, this analysis will be divided into three categories: the overview of the soft-skill curriculum at PPM SoM, the benefits of soft-skill curriculum, and the challenges of implementing soft-skill curriculum at a business school in Indonesia.

4.1 THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SOFT SKILL CURRICULUM AT PPM SOM

Based on interviews and observations, the soft skill curriculum at PPM SoM is divided into four specific or stand-alone courses. The informants stated that soft skill curriculum development at PPM SoM was based on the needs of the labor market and to prepare high-quality graduates to be more valuable to employers. PPM SoM, as the applied business school in Indonesia, is being challenged to contribute to the industry by providing high-quality graduates from their business curriculum. As a result, the Indonesian Ministry of Education is developing a soft-skill curriculum that follows employers' requirements and higher education goals.

Based on internal analysis and curriculum development, PPM SoM focuses toward four essential soft-skill development in their business curriculum. Those four soft skills have been validated through several FGDs and interviews with stakeholders, including alums, whether it influences their workplace self-development. Hence, the soft skills decided to be implemented in the curriculum of the PPM School of Management are Self Confidence (SC), Relationship Building (RB), Team Leadership (TL), and Passion for growth (PG). Those four soft skills were summarized based on the discussion and internal research by the university and agreed to be implemented in the curriculum for the undergraduate program at PPM SoM. The dynamic changes in the industrial market could influence the need for soft skills in business practice. Hence, the implementation of those skills must be considered necessary for business performance in the labour market.

How could those soft skills be integrated into the business school curriculum? Based on our data analysis, the PPM SoM performs a stand-alone subject method in integrating their soft-skills development into the study curriculum. Each year, PPM SoM presents a stand-alone soft-skills course. Therefore, during the eight semesters of undergraduate study (four years), there are four soft skill courses, one per year. The first year is called a "Self-Development Course," where the students are introduced to soft skill development at a higher university. In the second year, there is "Team Development," where students face a higher level of soft skill development in team-based activities. In the third year, there is a "Community Development Course" where students should develop their soft skills in the out-of-campus community for a specific duration.

Furthermore, in the final year, there is an "Internship Course" where students should experience a real-work environment in a corporation or business organization for a specific duration. Although all four soft skills should be integrated into all courses, each

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course stresses only one to two soft skills each year. For example, in the "Team-Development Course," the main targets of soft-skill implementation are *Team Leadership (TL)* and *Self Confidence (SC)*. Meanwhile, in the "Community Development Course," the main target of soft skill development is *Relationship Building (RB)*. In the "Internship Course," the main development target is *Passion for Growth (PG)*.

Regarding course performance, each soft skill course has a different approach to its study performance. In the first year of the 'Self Development Course,' students are divided into eight to ten students per group and accompanied by one mentor. Among the groups, students partnered with one another to implement a 'buddy system' to be moral police in soft-skill evaluation. What do students do? During one semester of the course implementation, they are challenged to develop one of the four primary soft skills (SC, PG, TL, RB) by detailing one weekly activity. For example, William is choosing "self-confidence" as his topic of soft skill development. He has to develop his self-confidence through activities that give him the courage to increase his self-confidence, such as being a presenter in class, being a master of ceremonies, giving a stand-up comedy in the café, performing music, or others. The challenges are necessary, and Buddy must monitor them on a weekly basis and report them to the mentor.

In the second year of their studies, students are challenged to develop their soft skills at the team level. They will experience the "team development course." They will be divided into groups of eight to ten students and accompanied by a mentor. The team's mission is to plan and execute an event to improve teamwork and implement the soft skills developed in the first year. The evaluation is being made in every mentoring session every two weeks to review the progress of the event planning and the soft skills development among them, especially the teamwork development.

In the third year of their study, students are challenged with more exciting programs for their soft competencies' development. At this level, students are divided into groups (10 students per group) and given the mission to plan and execute a sustainable social project for a community. The course focuses not only on the event but also on developing soft skills through teamwork challenges and self-pressure in real-time situations while performing some activities within the community. Lastly, before graduation, students must experience a two-month internship program in a company or business organization. They should work in the areas of their majors, such as marketing, human resources, accounting, financing, and others. In this phase, students must develop

their soft skills through real-life experiences in actual business activities. Students are challenged to evaluate a fundamental business practice and report the progress to a mentor at the university.

4.2 THE BENEFIT OF SOFT SKILL CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

Although the current situation challenges the four soft skills in the PPM curriculum, the student's comments are positive and agree with the benefit of its implementation. Based on the in-depth interviews, all informants agreed to the benefits of soft skill development being implemented during their study at PPM. The students confirm that the knowledge and skills they gathered and experienced during the classes are helpful in the workplace. Informant 1 (23), one of the students who graduated two years ago, appreciates PPM's soft skill development.

> *"I think PPM helps me a lot to develop my soft skills. During the study, I was quite bored with the soft skill courses because each program seemed to have no detailed outcome. However, when I work at a multinational company, I can feel the benefit of that soft skill development. I feel more confident and highly passionate about growth to level up my career."* (informant 1)

On the other hand, Informant 2 (22) stated that she thought that soft skill development on campus was not explicitly stated in one or two courses. She assumed that soft skill development was embedded in several courses during her study as a typical practical implementation in public universities. However, in PPM SoM, she found an exciting approach regarding soft skill curriculum implementation.

> *I think, on other campuses, there is no specific course focused on soft skill development. Most students develop their soft skills through extracurricular activities or other interactive learning methods in the classroom. However, at PPM SoM, we can have four courses that focus on soft skill development!"* (Informant 2).

Informant 1 and Informant 2 agreed that soft skill development in higher education is vital to their career development after graduation. Moreover, the informants also agreed that universities should have specific courses or customized curricula to ensure that soft skills developments are carefully implemented during their studies at the university. All informants also stated that most still think about the soft skills they acquired during their extracurricular programs. However, the student has acknowledged the soft skill

curriculum at PPM as one of the most memorable moments of their study at PPM. This also confirms that the program benefits the students even after graduation.

4.3 THE CHALLENGES OF SOFT-SKILL CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

Soft skills are the personality characteristics that allow people to work successfully in teams, effectively connect and communicate with others, and resolve issues at work. Employers place a high value on these abilities because they enable workers to adapt to shifting workplace dynamics and successfully traverse challenging work situations. Universities are putting more emphasis on coaching students in soft skills because of their importance in the workplace. However, tutoring university students in soft skills comes with some challenges. The primary challenge in soft skill mentoring for college students is that they might need help understanding the importance of soft skills. Many students might not perceive the need to devote time and effort to acquiring soft skills because they believe they are less crucial than technical skills. Some students could also think that soft skills are natural qualities that cannot be learned or developed. Higher education must teach students the value of soft skills and how they might benefit their future professions to overcome this dilemma as stated by informant 4 (31) as one of the mentors in the soft skill development program.

> *"Soft skill development is important, but some students do not understand the purpose of this special courses. It could decrease their motivation to follow all the requirement activities in this courses, such as weekly mentoring and peer evalutaion with their buddy. But, for those who do not really concern about soft skill development, they may think this course is just another boring course!"* (Informant 4).

The difficulty of tailoring the mentoring experience for each student is also an obstacle to soft skill development for college students. A one-size-fits-all approach to mentoring may not be successful because various students have different skill levels, learning preferences, and career objectives. Universities can address this issue by matching students with mentors who share their interests in a particular field or career path. Maintaining the mentoring relationship can be challenging, bringing us to our final problem of soft-skill mentoring for university students. Coaching soft skills takes time and calls for persistent effort and criticism. However, a regular mentoring schedule could be problematic if mentors and students have conflicting priorities. Universities can solve this

by rewarding mentors and students who complete a soft-skill mentoring program with incentives like course credit or recognition.

Teaching and evaluating these talents can be challenging, which presents another obstacle to soft-skill mentoring for university students. Soft talents are evaluable subjectively and are challenging to quantify, in contrast to technical skills, which can be easily assessed and defined. This makes it difficult for mentors to assess students' progress and offer criticism. Universities can assist students in analyzing and developing their soft skills by using tools like self-assessment questionnaires and buddy feedback to get around this problem.

5 DISCUSSION

Dealing with the dynamic development of the industrial world, universities need to develop an adaptive curriculum according to the needs of the business environment. However, the form of an adaptive curriculum is still being debated, whether to focus on developing soft skills or technical competencies. Finding the ideal curriculum model is a research topic always debated among education experts, primarily related to finding a model of integration of soft skills and hard skills learning, whether taught separately or integrated (Premuzic et al., 2010). This study proposes a separate soft skills learning model that can be used as a reference for curriculum development in business education in higher education institutions. However, a curriculum model that separates the development of soft skills from hard skills is only sometimes suitable for other types of higher education (Tan et al., 2021). Therefore, further research must be applied to find the best formula for developing the soft skills curriculum. Adapting the curriculum carried out on the object of this research can become a practical example of applying curriculum soft skills in tertiary institutions.

6 CONCLUSION

As the pioneer of business school in Indonesia, PPM SoM has an exciting approach to implementing a soft skills curriculum using several engaging activities. The activities are divided into four soft skill courses: Self Development Course, Team Development Course, Community Development Course, and Internship Program. This curriculum has been implemented for over a decade and is still valuable and beneficial to the students in the current context. However, some evaluation and assessment should be made to upgrade

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the indicators to the current need of the industry and business environment. Implementing soft skill development as PPM applied to its curriculum will require several aspects. The need for qualified lecturers as mentors will be mandatory. On the other hand, the challenges of the personal situation of every mentor will also be raised since the mentoring program will be running during the semester. Moreover, the resource allocation issue will also be challenging regarding value for money to every program being made.

Soft skill mentoring is a crucial part of academic training since it aids in the growth of the character traits needed for professional success. The necessity to teach students the importance of soft skills, the difficulty of assessing and personalizing tutoring, and the difficulty of maintaining the mentoring relationship are some of the difficulties involved with soft skill mentoring. By addressing these issues, universities can effectively tutor students in soft skills that help them succeed in their future employment.

Further research will be needed to develop the analysis and compare the implementation of soft skill development with other universities in Indonesia and other countries. Although this research is still exploratory, the limitations of the result and analysis could be reduced by adding several factors and further analysis that should have been applied to this research. Perhaps this could inspire further research to develop more knowledge-sharing opportunities on this topic.

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