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Integration of Soft Skills and Total Quality Management as a Strategy for Vocational Education Quality Management

*Ratih Erissa Putri¹, Juliani Damnur², Supianto³, Salfen Hasri⁴, Sohiron⁵

¹⁻⁵Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Jl. HR. Soebrantas No.15,
Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia

*ratihputri39@guru.smp.belajar.id

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Abstract

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This study aims to analyze the integration patterns of soft skills within the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) and examine their managerial implications for improving educational quality at SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru. A qualitative case study approach was employed, conducted simultaneously across three institutions: SMK Muhammadiyah 1, 2, and 3 Terpadu Pekanbaru. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation studies, subsequently analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, and validated through source triangulation, technique triangulation, member checking, and thick description. The findings reveal that the integration of soft skills within TQM principles across the three schools is systematically embedded throughout all dimensions of school management, encompassing customer focus, quality-oriented leadership, human resource involvement, the PDCA cycle, and continuous improvement. Soft skills do not serve as supplementary elements; rather, they are substantial components that organically drive a quality culture, further reinforced by Islamic institutional identity as an accelerator of organizational transformation. The managerial implications produced are multilayered and transformative, covering organizational culture strengthening, human resource capacity development, character-based curriculum restructuring, industrial partnership expansion, and the establishment of an autonomous and adaptive internal quality assurance system. This study proposes that the sustainability of vocational education quality is achievable only when soft skills become an integral part of the school's organizational DNA. These findings contribute to achieving SDG Goals 4 and 8 by preparing technically excellent graduates who are characterologically mature and globally competitive.

⁵ orcid id: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2994-3056>

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pola integrasi soft skills dalam prinsip-prinsip *Total Quality Management* (TQM) serta mengkaji implikasi manajerialnya terhadap peningkatan mutu pendidikan di SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis studi kasus yang dilaksanakan di tiga lembaga sekaligus, yakni SMK Muhammadiyah 1, 2, dan 3 Terpadu Pekanbaru. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan studi dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña, serta diuji keabsahannya melalui triangulasi sumber, triangulasi teknik, member checking, dan thick description. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa integrasi soft skills dalam prinsip-prinsip TQM di ketiga sekolah terbentuk secara sistematis dan menyatu dalam seluruh dimensi manajemen, mulai dari fokus pelanggan, kepemimpinan berorientasi mutu, keterlibatan sumber daya manusia, pendekatan PDCA, hingga perbaikan berkesinambungan. Soft skills tidak berposisi sebagai elemen tambahan, melainkan sebagai komponen substansial yang menggerakkan budaya mutu secara organik, diperkuat oleh identitas keislaman yang menjadi akselerator transformasi organisasi. Implikasi manajerial yang dihasilkan bersifat multilapis dan transformatif, mencakup penguatan budaya organisasi, pengembangan kapasitas sumber daya manusia, restrukturisasi kurikulum berbasis karakter, perluasan kemitraan industri, serta terbentuknya sistem penjaminan mutu internal yang mandiri dan adaptif. Penelitian ini menghasilkan proposisi baru bahwa keberlanjutan mutu pendidikan kejuruan hanya tercapai ketika soft skills telah menjadi bagian dari DNA organisasi sekolah. Temuan ini berkontribusi pada pencapaian SDGs tujuan keempat dan kedelapan melalui penyiapan lulusan yang unggul secara teknis, matang secara karakter, dan berdaya saing global.

I. INTRODUCTION

Vocational education institutions in Indonesia are under increasing pressure to produce graduates who are not only technically skilled but also equipped with the soft skills demanded by the modern workplace. In this context, Total Quality Management (TQM) has emerged as a widely adopted framework for improving educational quality in a systematic and holistic manner (Rahayuningsih et al., 2023). The three SMK Muhammadiyah schools in Pekanbaru, namely SMK Muhammadiyah 1, SMK Muhammadiyah 2, and SMK Muhammadiyah 3 Terpadu, represent an empirically notable case in which the integration of soft skills within TQM principles has produced measurable outcomes, including nationally

recognized industry partnerships, academic achievements, and high graduate employability rates. These outcomes present a compelling case for deeper scientific investigation into how this integration is constructed and what managerial implications it generates for the sustainability of vocational education quality.

Ideally, the successful implementation of Total Quality Management in educational institutions is not something that can be achieved instantly or uniformly, but rather requires a long, complex, systematic, and multidimensional process. Hidayati (2025) asserts that TQM in education can only function effectively when all organizational components, from leaders to educational staff, have developed a full commitment to an institutionally embedded quality culture, rather than merely a formality program. Furthermore, Besterfield et al. (2023) state that genuine TQM implementation demands comprehensive organizational culture transformation that often requires years and faces internal resistance that is not easily overcome. In the context of soft skills development, Fields (2024) affirms that integrating character and interpersonal skills into a school's quality management system requires carefully designed curricula, valid measurement instruments, and consistently supportive learning ecosystems. Arcaro (2023) adds that educational institutions that truly succeed in implementing quality-based education have generally undergone repeated phases of failure and evaluation before finding the appropriate and contextual implementation pattern. Begum (2024) further emphasizes that TQM success in educational institutions is greatly influenced by internal system maturity, human resource capacity, and infrastructure readiness, none of which can be overlooked in a sustainable quality assurance process. Thus, theoretically, the maximum success of TQM implementation integrated with soft skills development as observed in the three SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru schools far exceeds the ideal expectations formulated by experts, making this phenomenon highly worthy of in-depth scientific investigation.

A substantive research gap is evident when the field conditions found at the three SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru schools are examined against what current

Total Quality Management and soft skills literature has established. The literature consistently emphasizes the difficulty and length of genuine Total Quality Management implementation (Arcaro, 2023; Besterfield et al., 2023; Hidayati, 2025), and no existing study has specifically examined how Islamic institutional identity functions as a facilitating variable in this process within the context of vocational education. Furthermore, while soft skills development has been studied in vocational contexts (Agustian et al., 2024; Manullang et al., 2023; Saputro et al., 2025), its systematic integration within a Total Quality Management framework at Islamic vocational schools remains unexplored in the literature (Ikhsan et al., 2023; Santi et al., 2024). The measurable outcomes observed at these three institutions, including Center of Excellence recognition, Outstanding accreditation, national academic achievements, and high graduate employability rates, represent a phenomenon that existing theoretical frameworks have not yet adequately explained, thereby establishing a clear and scientifically legitimate research gap.

This gap between what the existing literature predicts and what the empirical data shows gives rise to a fundamental and scientifically urgent research problem. If Total Quality Management success requires a lengthy process and deep organizational maturity as the literature asserts, yet these three schools have achieved measurable quality outcomes with a distinctive integration approach, the central question becomes: what are the soft skills and Total Quality Management integration patterns at SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru, and what managerial implications does this integration generate for the improvement of vocational education quality? This question is not merely descriptive but theoretically productive, as its answer has the potential to extend current understanding of how soft skills and Total Quality Management interact within Islamic educational organizations.

Existing scholarship on Total Quality Management in education has established that effective quality management requires organizational commitment, leadership support, and sustained evaluation processes (Besterfield et al., 2023; Hidayati, 2025). Research on soft skills development in vocational

education has similarly demonstrated the importance of integrating interpersonal and character competencies into graduate preparation frameworks (Agustian et al., 2024; Hidayati, 2025). However, the majority of these studies have addressed TQM and soft skills as separate domains. Most research on TQM in educational settings has focused on applying TQM principles within general school management contexts, such as improving teacher competencies, managing infrastructure, and internal evaluation systems (Dewi & Supeno, 2025; Hidayati, 2025; Rustandi et al., 2023). Meanwhile, research examining soft skills development in vocational education has predominantly emphasized work readiness and interpersonal competency aspects without systematically connecting them to a TQM framework (Agustian et al., 2024; Irfan et al., 2022; Manullang et al., 2023; Saputro et al., 2025; Setyawan et al., 2024). These gaps collectively indicate that prior research has not addressed the question of how soft skills and Total Quality Management can be strategically integrated as a unified and structured quality management system, particularly within the context of Islamic-characteristic vocational education institutions, and has not examined what managerial implications such integration produces at the organizational level.

On the other hand, research specifically examining the integration of soft skills and TQM within Islamic-characteristic vocational education institutions remains extremely limited. Several existing studies only marginally touch upon the dimension of character values in quality management without establishing it as a primary research variable (Abidin, 2022; Ikhsan et al., 2023; Ismail et al., 2021; Santi et al., 2024; Suprojo D.S. et al., 2024). This gap firmly positions the present study as an original and non-repetitive investigation, as it specifically examines soft skills and TQM integration as an educational quality management strategy at SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru, while considering the Islamic dimension as an inherent part of the quality system being constructed, thereby producing a distinctive and meaningful scientific contribution to the development of Islamic educational management scholarship.



Figure 1. Visualization of previous literature studies open knowledge maps

The novelty of this research lies in the construction of a conceptual framework that integratively positions soft skills not as supplementary elements but as substantial components embedded within every TQM principle in the context of Muhammadiyah-characteristic vocational education. This study is the first to construct a soft skills and TQM integration framework grounded in empirical data from three educational institutions simultaneously within a single region, thereby producing a more comprehensive, contextual, and replicable analytical model. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education, by presenting a vocational education quality management model proven effective in producing highly competitive, characterologically strong graduates ready to contribute to sustainable development.

The urgency of this research is considerable given that Indonesia faces major challenges in ensuring the quality of vocational education graduates who are not only technically skilled but also possess the character and soft skills demanded by the modern workplace. Amid accelerating industrial transformation and twenty-first century competency demands, vocational education institutions are urgently required to identify quality management models that are adaptive, holistic, and

value-based. This study emerges as an academically pressing response to that need, offering an integrative model proven successful in the field that can serve as a reference for national education policy. Furthermore, this study's contribution is relevant to the SDGs Goal 8 agenda, namely promoting inclusive economic growth through improving the quality of a skilled, characterologically sound, and globally competitive workforce.

Based on the foregoing background, this study focuses on two central and interrelated issues that form a coherent research framework. First, how are soft skills integrated within the principles of Total Quality Management applied at SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru as an educational quality management strategy. Second, what are the managerial implications of soft skills and TQM integration for improving educational quality at SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru from a sustainable development perspective.

II. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach as proposed by Creswell & Poth (2016), who asserts that qualitative research aims to understand phenomena deeply through the exploration of meanings constructed by research subjects within their natural context. The research design selected is a case study, drawing on Yin (2018), who affirms that case study is appropriate when researchers seek to answer "how" and "why" questions regarding contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts that cannot be separated from their surrounding conditions. This research employs a multiple-case study design, treating the three SMK Muhammadiyah schools as three embedded units of analysis within a single bounded context, as conceptualized by Yin (2018). This design was chosen based on the need to comprehensively explore how soft skills and Total Quality Management integration patterns are applied across the three institutions, generating cross-case analytical patterns that are both contextually grounded and theoretically meaningful.

The research was conducted at SMK Muhammadiyah 1, SMK Muhammadiyah 2, and SMK Muhammadiyah 3 Integrated Pekanbaru, selected purposively due to

their documented achievements in vocational education quality management and their shared Muhammadiyah institutional identity, which makes them a particularly rich and bounded research context. Data were collected through three primary techniques, namely in-depth interviews with a total of 18 informants, including three school principals, three vice principals for curriculum affairs, nine teachers selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in quality management programs, and three representatives from industry partners; participatory observation of learning processes and school quality culture; and documentation studies of quality policy documents, work programs, and institutional achievement reports from all three schools. Informants were selected based on the following criteria: direct involvement in school quality management, a minimum of three years of service at the respective institution, and the ability to provide information-rich accounts of soft skills and Total Quality Management integration practices.

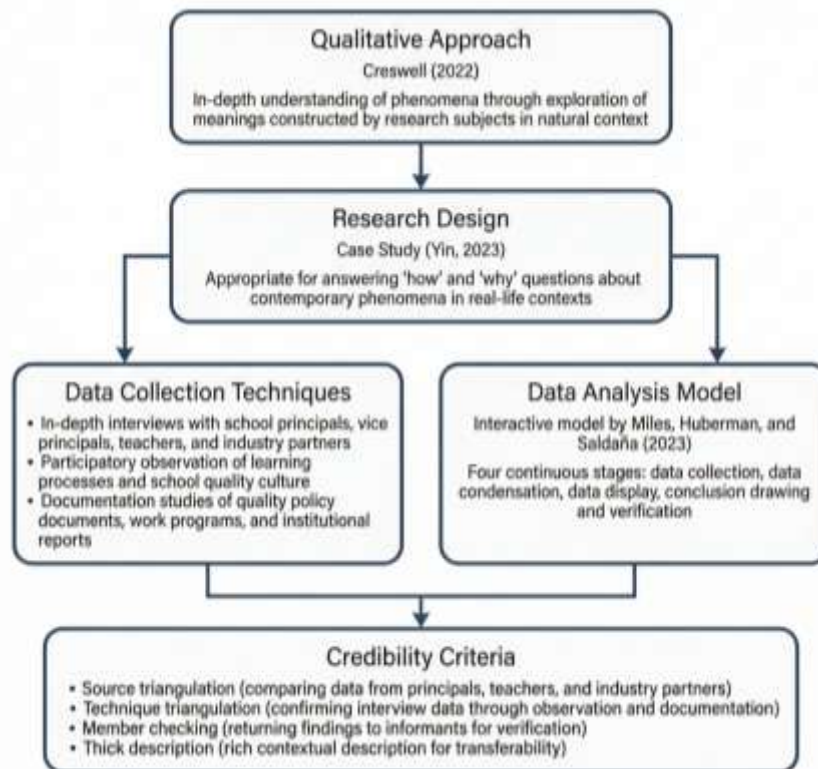


Figure 2. Research framework

Data analysis in this study follows the interactive model developed by Miles et al. (2014), encompassing four continuous stages, namely data collection, data

condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. These stages were applied cyclically, with the researcher continuously moving between field data and conceptual analysis until saturated and meaningful integration patterns were identified. To ensure data trustworthiness, this study applies four credibility criteria as formulated by Creswell & Poth (2016), namely source triangulation by comparing data obtained from school principals, teachers, and industry partners; technique triangulation by confirming interview data through observation and documentation; member checking by returning research findings to informants for verification; and thick description to ensure richness of contextual description that enables the transferability of this study's findings to similar educational institutions.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Soft Skills Integration Patterns within Total Quality Management Principles

The findings reveal that the integration of soft skills within Total Quality Management principles across the three SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru schools is not an incidental process, but rather a systematically constructed, deliberately planned pattern that is embedded throughout all layers of school management. As stated by the principal of SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Pekanbaru during an interview: "We do not teach soft skills as a separate subject; it is embedded in every activity, every interaction, every evaluation we do." This pattern was consistently confirmed through observations and documentation across all three institutions. This integration pattern can be understood through five TQM principle dimensions, each of which inherently and operationally contains soft skills components.

In the first dimension, namely customer focus, all three schools position the satisfaction of students, parents, and the industrial sector as the primary orientation of all quality policies. The soft skills integrated within this dimension include communication ability, empathy, and excellent service. What distinguishes this from typical school practices is the systematic and institutionalized nature of the customer orientation: rather than responding reactively to complaints, these schools proactively engage stakeholders through structured mechanisms

embedded within their quality management cycles. SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Pekanbaru concretely realizes this through routine consultation programs between homeroom teachers and parents, as well as periodic dialogue forums with industry partners to align graduate competency needs. A vice principal for curriculum affairs at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 noted in an interview: "Every semester, we sit with our industry partners and ask them directly: what soft skills are your new employees still lacking? Their answers directly shape our programs." SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Pekanbaru adds an Islamic value-based service dimension, whereby all teaching and educational staff are required to apply Islamic communication ethics in every interaction with educational stakeholders. SMK Muhammadiyah 3 Integrated Pekanbaru implements this through a structured complaint and feedback system, ensuring that every concern raised by students or parents is handled responsively and thoroughly documented.

In the second dimension, namely quality-oriented leadership, the findings reveal that leadership soft skills, decision-making, and integrity are inseparable components of the managerial style of school principals across all three institutions. The principal of SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Pekanbaru actively leads weekly evaluation meetings that address not only academic achievements but also the quality of social interactions among school community members as quality culture indicators. At SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Pekanbaru, quality-oriented leadership is manifested through the principal's direct exemplary conduct in performing communal worship routines, punctuality, and discipline, which indirectly cultivates an organizational climate conducive to the growth of soft skills among all school community members. Meanwhile, at SMK Muhammadiyah 3 Integrated Pekanbaru, the principal applies a transformational leadership approach that encourages teachers and staff to continuously innovate in the learning process, thereby sustaining creativity and initiative as components of managerial soft skills on an ongoing basis.

In the third dimension, namely total human resource involvement, the findings reveal that collaboration, responsibility, and interpersonal communication soft skills are built through mechanisms of active engagement of all school

community members in decision-making processes and quality program implementation. SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Pekanbaru operationalizes this principle through a quality development team involving teachers from various subject areas in a cross-functional manner, so that every teacher feels a shared responsibility toward graduate quality. SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Pekanbaru develops a monthly effective teacher forum as a space for sharing best practices, which simultaneously serves as an arena for developing professional communication soft skills and the ability to argue constructively. SMK Muhammadiyah 3 Integrated Pekanbaru directly involves students in the learning quality control team through peer assessment mechanisms and classroom reflection forums, so that students' responsibility and honesty soft skills are also cultivated throughout the process.

In the fourth dimension, namely the process-based approach through the PDCA cycle, the findings reveal that planning, critical analysis, and adaptability soft skills are naturally integrated into every stage of the quality management cycle. In the Plan stage, all three schools involve teachers in developing annual work programs based on previous achievement data, training strategic and analytical thinking abilities. In the Do stage, the implementation of learning programs and character development activities actively engages students as participants rather than mere objects, directly stimulating independence and initiative soft skills. In the Check stage, evaluation is conducted not only on academic outcomes but also on students' attitudinal and behavioral development through character observation instruments developed internally by each school. In the Act stage, follow-up actions on evaluation results are realized in personally designed character remediation programs tailored to individual student needs, reflecting educators' empathy and caring soft skills.

In the fifth dimension, namely continuous improvement, the findings reveal that all three schools possess systematic mechanisms for continuously updating and enhancing the quality of soft skills integration within their programs. SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Pekanbaru conducts routine benchmarking visits to industry partners to ensure that the soft skills being developed remain consistently relevant to current workforce needs. SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Pekanbaru periodically invites

industry practitioners to deliver direct soft skills training to students, enabling contextual and applicable content renewal. SMK Muhammadiyah 3 Integrated Pekanbaru develops a best practice documentation system that allows every successful learning innovation to be duplicated and standardized as part of the school's quality system. Overall, the integration pattern identified demonstrates that soft skills are not inserted into TQM as supplementary additions, but rather exist as the driving spirit that animates all TQM principles from within.

The research findings regarding soft skills integration patterns within Total Quality Management principles across the three SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru schools reveal a phenomenon that partially reinforces while simultaneously extending the theoretical frameworks formulated by scholars. The following discussion systematically reanalyzes each major finding in relation to existing literature, demonstrating the conceptual contribution of this study to the field of Islamic educational management. Hidayati (2025) asserts that TQM in education can only function effectively when all organizational components maintain a full commitment to an institutionally embedded quality culture. The present findings reinforce this assertion while simultaneously transcending its conceptual boundaries, as all three schools demonstrate that commitment to quality culture is not merely institutional-administrative in nature but has merged with Islamic values personally embraced by the entire school community. Field observations across all three institutions consistently revealed that quality-oriented behaviors were discussed by school community members in explicitly Islamic ethical terms, suggesting that value internalization functioned as a motivational foundation for quality commitment. This yields a new finding that the internalization of spiritual values can serve as an accelerator that strengthens quality commitment more organically than formal managerial mechanisms alone.

Furthermore, Fields (2024) states that integrating soft skills into a quality management system requires carefully designed curricula and consistently supportive learning ecosystems. The field findings affirm this position, yet with the additional dimension that the learning ecosystem in question must extend beyond structural-curricular arrangements to also encompass leadership exemplary

conduct and a conducive organizational culture, as concretely practiced by all three school principals in this study. Documentation analysis across all three schools confirmed that soft skills indicators were embedded not only in learning instruments but also in teacher performance assessment rubrics and institutional self-evaluation tools, demonstrating a more comprehensive integration approach than typically described in the existing soft skills literature. Besterfield et al. (2023) assert that genuine TQM implementation demands comprehensive organizational culture transformation often requiring years and facing considerable internal resistance. The present findings do not entirely align with this position, as all three schools successfully constructed effective integration patterns through a consistent yet gradual approach that did not necessarily traverse the prolonged resistance phase described in the literature. This was made possible by the strong organizational cultural roots already established within the Muhammadiyah institutional identity, allowing the transformation toward quality culture to unfold within a pre-existing value framework. This finding generates a new proposition that educational institutions possessing strong and cohesive ideological identities tend to experience smoother and more accelerated Total Quality Management adoption processes compared to value-neutral institutions. This proposition is supported by the cross-case evidence gathered in this study: across all three schools, informants consistently described the Muhammadiyah institutional identity not as a constraint but as a motivational driver for quality commitment. As one teacher at SMK Muhammadiyah 2 stated: "Amanah in Islam means we are accountable for the quality of what we produce. That is not just a management concept; it is a personal value." This finding extends existing Total Quality Management education literature, which has not yet fully explored the role of institutional ideological identity as an accelerator of quality culture formation, particularly within Islamic educational organizations (Abidin, 2022; Erliyanto & Supriyono, 2024; Ikhsan et al., 2023).

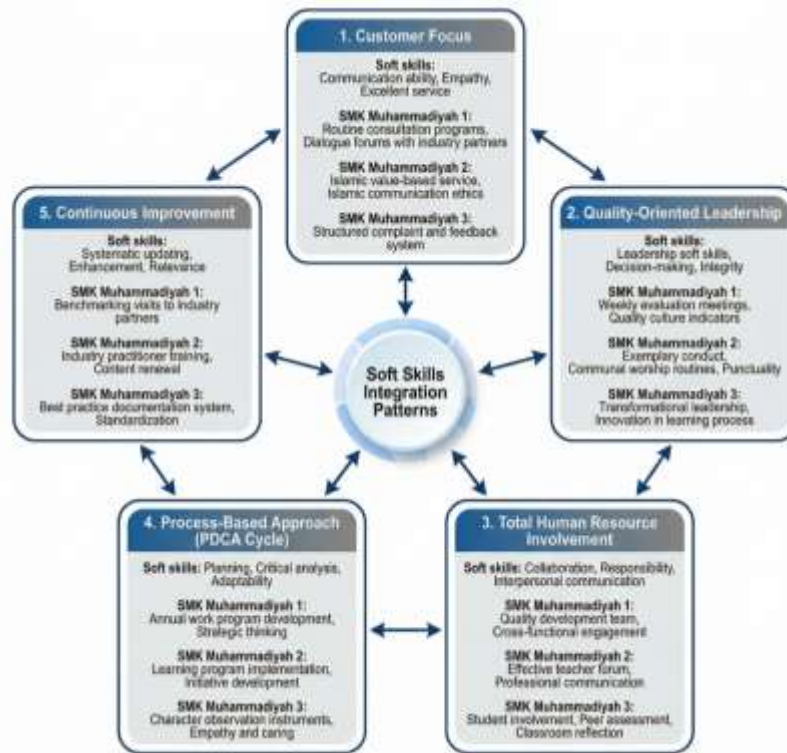


Figure 3. *Soft skills integration patterns within total quality management principles*

Managerial Implications of Soft Skills and TQM Integration for Improving Educational Quality

The findings reveal that the managerial implications of soft skills and TQM integration across the three SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru schools are multilayered, encompassing institutional, human resource, curricular, partnership, and quality sustainability dimensions. These implications do not stand in isolation but mutually reinforce one another, forming a holistic and adaptive quality management ecosystem.

In the institutional dimension, the integration of soft skills and TQM has produced fundamental changes in the organizational culture of all three schools. Quality culture is no longer understood as a mere administrative obligation but has transformed into a lived value embraced by the entire school community. SMK Muhammadiyah 2 Pekanbaru, having attained Center of Excellence status and Outstanding accreditation, reflects how a deeply embedded quality culture can drive institutional recognition that impacts public trust and steadily increasing enrollment figures year after year. This implication is also evident in the

increasingly strong institutional identity of all three schools as vocational education institutions that produce not only technically skilled graduates but also those with Islamic character and high global competitiveness.

In the human resource dimension, the integration of soft skills within the TQM framework has driven significant changes in the professional development orientation of teachers and educational staff. Teachers are no longer merely facilitated to improve their pedagogical and technical competencies, but are also systematically developed in communication, empathy, collaboration, and classroom leadership abilities. SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Pekanbaru implements a continuing professional development program that explicitly incorporates soft skills strengthening modules as a mandatory component, so that teachers serve as living models for students in embodying the soft skills values being taught. This implication creates a cascading effect, whereby improvements in teachers' soft skills directly impact the quality of learning interactions and ultimately shape student character in a more authentic and profound manner.

In the curricular dimension, the findings reveal that soft skills and TQM integration has driven all three schools to undertake substantial curriculum restructuring. Soft skills are no longer taught as standalone separate subjects but are integrated across disciplines through project-based learning approaches, industrial simulations, and real-world case studies. SMK Muhammadiyah 3 Integrated Pekanbaru has specifically developed integrated learning instruments that incorporate soft skills achievement indicators alongside technical competency indicators, resulting in holistic assessment that reflects a complete graduate profile. This curricular implication ultimately produces more meaningful learning experiences for students, as they not only learn about vocational competencies but simultaneously have their character shaped through the learning process itself.

In the industrial partnership dimension, soft skills and TQM integration has significantly opened and expanded cooperative networks. Industry partners report high satisfaction with the quality of internship participants from all three schools, not only in terms of technical competency but especially regarding work attitudes, discipline, adaptability, and work ethic that reflect well-internalized soft skills. This

industry confidence is directly proportional to increasing graduate employment opportunities, the expansion of internship programs to larger-scale companies, and the establishment of direct recruitment channels facilitated by the schools. This implication affirms that soft skills integrated within TQM impact not only the school's internal quality but also the relevance and competitiveness of graduates in the actual labor market.

In the quality sustainability dimension, the most significant implication identified is the formation of an autonomous and adaptive internal quality assurance system across all three schools. This system does not depend on external pressures such as accreditation requirements or supervisory oversight, but grows from the collective awareness of the entire school community regarding the importance of quality as a shared responsibility. Routine self-evaluation mechanisms, systematic best practice documentation, and an organizational climate open to criticism and innovation serve as the primary pillars of quality sustainability across all three schools. Overall, the managerial implications produced by soft skills and TQM integration transcend mere improvement in formal quality indicators, having touched upon aspects of profound transformation in the way schools perceive, manage, and transmit quality to every successive generation of their students.

The findings regarding the managerial implications of soft skills and TQM integration across the three SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru schools substantially reinforce the argument of Arcaro (2023), who states that educational institutions that genuinely succeed in implementing quality-based education have generally undergone repeated evaluation phases before identifying the appropriate and contextual implementation pattern. The present findings confirm this position, as all three schools have demonstrably traversed a long journey in refining their integration systems. The principal of SMK Muhammadiyah 3 Integrated acknowledged in an interview: "We did not arrive at this system overnight. It took years of trial, reflection, and adjustment. But every failure taught us something that we then built into the next iteration of the program." The results of this iterative refinement are now manifested in multilayered implications spanning

institutional, human resource, curricular, industrial partnership, and quality sustainability dimensions. This finding is also consistent with recent research by Erliyanto & Supriyono (2024) and Hamida & Haryati (2024), who both underscore the importance of sustained organizational commitment and iterative evaluation in achieving durable quality improvement in Islamic educational settings.

However, the most distinctive new finding of this study is that the strongest managerial implications emerge not from the dimension of formal systems and procedures, but from the dimension of collective cultural transformation and mindset shifts among school community members. Begum (2024) emphasizes that TQM success is greatly influenced by internal system maturity and human resource capacity, and the present findings reinforce this position by demonstrating that the human resource capacity in question must be understood more broadly, encompassing not only technical and managerial competencies but also the soft skills maturity and character embedded within every individual across the school organization. This study therefore does not merely reinforce existing TQM theories but also contributes an original conceptual proposition, namely that genuine and sustainable vocational education quality is only achievable when soft skills have become an integral part of the school's organizational DNA, a proposition that extends the boundaries of quality management theory in ways that are both empirically grounded and contextually meaningful.

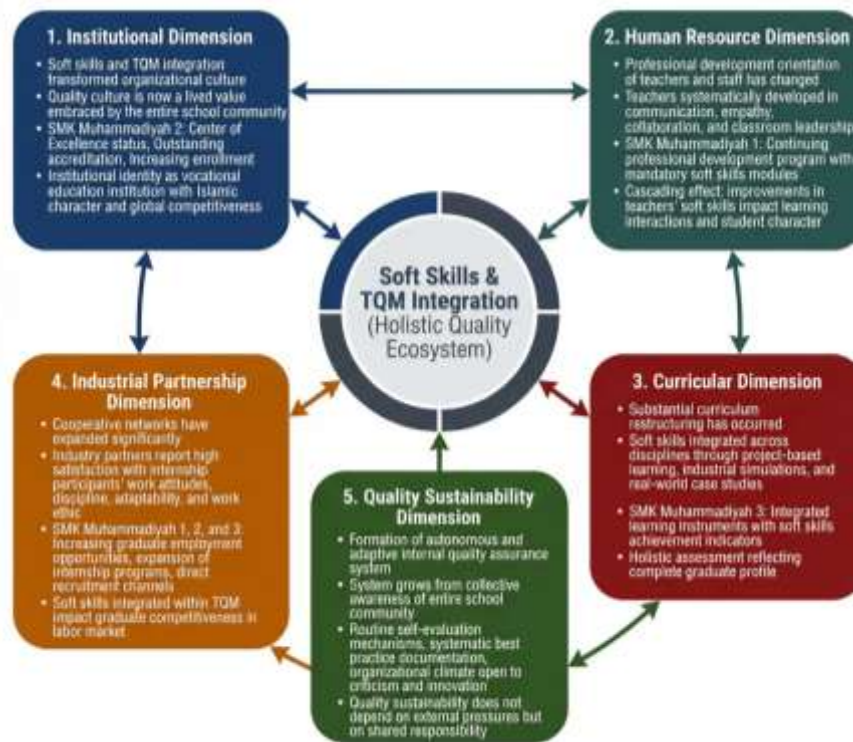


Figure 4. Managerial implications of soft skills and TQM integration

IV. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the integration of soft skills within Total Quality Management principles at the three SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru schools is systematically constructed and embedded throughout all dimensions of school management, namely customer focus, quality-oriented leadership, human resource involvement, the PDCA process-based approach, and continuous improvement; soft skills function not as supplementary elements but as the driving spirit of all TQM principles, further reinforced by Islamic institutional identity as an organic accelerator of quality culture; the resulting managerial implications are multilayered and transformative, encompassing organizational culture strengthening, human resource capacity enhancement, character-based curriculum restructuring, industrial partnership expansion, and the formation of an autonomous and adaptive internal quality assurance system; and the overarching proposition of this study is that genuine and sustainable vocational education quality is only achievable when soft skills have become an integral part of the school's organizational DNA, a finding that contributes concretely to the

achievement of SDGs Goal 4 on inclusive quality education and SDGs Goal 8 on inclusive economic growth, while affirming the strategic capacity of Islamic value-based vocational education institutions to produce technically excellent, characterologically mature, and globally competitive graduates. Future research is encouraged to examine this integration model in other Islamic educational contexts and to develop quantitative instruments for measuring the depth of soft skills embeddedness within TQM frameworks.

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