



Embedding 21st Century Soft Skills in Islamic Higher Education

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Abstract

Soft skills such as communication, leadership, teamwork, problem solving and entrepreneurship are increasingly recognised as essential for preparing graduates to thrive in today's complex and competitive global workforce. This study investigates the integration of these 21st-century soft skills within Malaysian higher education, with a specific focus on the Special Arabic Language Program (SALP) at a public institution. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with SALP alumni and supported by document analysis related to the programme. The findings reveal that both academic and co-curricular components of the SALP have played a significant role in developing students' soft skills. These experiences have fostered competencies in communication, leadership, social engagement and entrepreneurship, all nurtured within a framework grounded in Islamic values.

Keywords: Soft Skills, Islamic Higher Education, Communication Skills, Interaction, Leadership, Entrepreneurship

Abstrak

Kemahiran insaniah atau soft skills merangkumi kebolehan berkomunikasi secara efektif, kemahiran kepimpinan, kemampuan bekerja dalam kumpulan, kecekapan dalam menyelesaikan masalah, serta kebolehan keusahawanan yang menjadi aspek penting dalam membentuk graduan holistik yang mampu menyesuaikan diri dengan keperluan dunia kerjaya global yang semakin mencabar dan kompleks. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka penerapan Kemahiran Insaniah abad ke-21 dalam kalangan pelajar Institusi Pengajian Tinggi (IPT) di Malaysia khususnya pelajar dalam Program Khas Bahasa Arab (PKBA) yang dilaksanakan di sebuah institusi pengajian tinggi awam. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbentuk kajian kes dengan mengumpul data melalui temu bual separa berstruktur bersama alumni PKBA serta analisis dokumen berkaitan program tersebut. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa pengalaman pelajar dalam aktiviti akademik dan kokurikulum telah menyumbang secara signifikan kepada pembangunan kemahiran insaniah mereka. Program tersebut bukan sahaja menyediakan pembelajaran bahasa Arab kepada pelajar, malah menjadi wadah kepada pelajar untuk mengasah kemahiran komunikasi, interaksi sosial, kepimpinan dan keusahawanan selaras dengan nilai-nilai Islam.

Kata Kunci: Kemahiran Insaniah, Pendidikan Tinggi Islam, Kemahiran Komunikasi, Interaksi, Kepimpinan, Keusahawanan,

INTRODUCTION

Soft skills, encompassing non-technical competencies such as communication, leadership, critical thinking, teamwork and emotional intelligence, are increasingly recognised as essential attributes for graduate employability in the twenty-first century. In the context of a rapidly evolving global workforce, employers now seek individuals who can not only perform academically but also adapt to real-world challenges, collaborate effectively and demonstrate sound judgment under pressure. As academic qualifications alone are no longer sufficient to guarantee professional success, higher education institutions are under growing pressure to produce graduates who are both intellectually capable and socially competent.

In response to this shift, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has introduced a student development module designed to embed seven core soft skills into higher education curricula. These include communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving, teamwork, continuous learning and information management, entrepreneurial skills, professional ethics and morality and leadership (Siti Kausar and Mohd Noor Daud, 2021). Despite these efforts, graduate unemployment remains a persistent concern. The 2018 Tracer Study reported that 57,411 graduates, representing 19.8 percent of the total cohort, remained unemployed (Ling et al., 2020). Industry stakeholders frequently cite a lack of soft skills—particularly in areas such as communication, teamwork and leadership—as a key reason for this disconnect between graduate output and labour market expectations.

Internationally, countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom have made significant strides in integrating soft skills into higher education. Terms such as ‘metaskills’ in Australia and ‘transferable’ or ‘occupational’ skills in the United Kingdom reflect a more structured and outcome-oriented approach to graduate development (Siti Kausar and Mohd Noor Daud, 2021). These models have repositioned soft skills as core learning outcomes rather than supplemental attributes. In contrast, research in Malaysia continues to highlight inconsistencies in the implementation of soft skill initiatives, with critiques focused on the theoretical nature of student development programmes and the lack of experiential, context-based learning opportunities (Ling et al., 2020).

Islamic higher education institutions, while sharing these challenges, also possess unique strengths. Rooted in ethical and spiritual traditions, these institutions are well-positioned to foster holistic graduate profiles that balance intellectual capability with moral integrity. However, studies examining the systematic development of soft skills in these settings remain limited. While prior research (e.g. Nur Dini and Mohamad Isa, 2022) has shown that involvement in leadership, public speaking and volunteerism can significantly improve students’ interpersonal competencies and marketability, there is a lack of comprehensive models that demonstrate how these skills are cultivated in an integrated and institutionally supported manner within Islamic higher education.

The purpose of this paper is to address this gap by examining the integration of soft skills within an Islamic higher education institution through the case of the Special Arabic Language Program (SALP). This study explores how SALP functions as a structured platform for nurturing soft skills through academic, co-curricular and community engagement, all framed within Islamic values. Unlike prior studies that focus narrowly on skill acquisition, this paper positions soft skills within a broader framework of holistic education, guided by spiritual and ethical principles. The study argues that a values-based model of soft skill development, as reflected in SALP, offers a viable and impactful alternative to conventional approaches. In doing so, the research seeks to demonstrate that Islamic institutions can contribute meaningfully to the discourse on graduate employability by aligning spiritual development with practical skill formation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design through a case study approach to explore in depth the experiences of participants related to the development of soft skills. The qualitative method was selected as it is well-suited to the nature of this research, which focuses on the experiences of individuals within a specific educational setting namely, the Special Arabic Language Program (SALP) at a public higher education institution. This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how participants perceive and interpret their experiences, allowing for the exploration of subjective meanings associated with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews conducted both individually and in groups, complemented by document analysis. These methods were chosen for their ability to generate detailed and nuanced data, enabling the researchers to capture the complexity of the participants' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007).

The study employed purposive sampling to identify participants who could offer the most relevant and insightful perspectives. As noted by Creswell (2009) and Merriam (2009), purposive sampling allows researchers to select individuals who are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon of interest, thereby enhancing the depth and quality of the data. Table 1 below outlines the informants involved and the types of interviews conducted.

Table 1. Distribution of Informants

No.	Name (Not a real name)	SALP Academic Session	Type of Interview	Current Status
1.	Ustazah Khairiah	2013/2014	Individual	SALP Alumni who are working
2.	Ustazah Haniza			
3.	Ustazah Salimah			
4.	Ustazah Farah	2014/2015		
5.	Ustaz Yusri			
6.	Ustazah Azman	2016/2017		
7.	Ustaz Luqman			
8.	Ustaz Rizal			
9.	Cik Liyana	2017/2018		

10.	Zain	2018/2019	Focus Group Discussion (2)	SALP alumni graduated with a bachelor's degree
11.	Nurul			
12.	Hanirah			
13.	Syafiyah	2020/2021	Focus Group Discussion (4)	SALP Alumni as postgraduate students
14.	Hazwani			
15.	Maryam			
16.	Hakim	2021/2022	Focus Group Discussion (3)	SALP alumni are currently studying for a bachelor's degree
17.	Rosnizah			
18.	Fadwa			
19.	Hanna	2021/2022	Focus Group Discussion (1)	
20.	Zaki			
21.	Dahlia			
22.	Haura			
23.	Tasneem			

Document analysis was also conducted to complement and substantiate the data obtained through interviews. This method facilitated data triangulation with other sources, thereby enhancing the overall validity and reliability of the study (Merriam, 2009). The document analysis focused on materials relevant to the implementation of the SALP, including curriculum outlines, course syllabi, and records related to teaching and learning activities within the program.

Thematic analysis was applied to examine both interview transcripts and documentary evidence. Through this process, data were systematically coded and organized into themes aligned with the research questions. Triangulation between interview and document data was employed to cross-verify findings and improve the robustness and accuracy of the analysis. This approach ensured a more holistic interpretation of the participants' experiences and the institutional practices underpinning soft skills development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Communication and collaboration skills

The findings of this study indicate that the teaching and learning process serves as a crucial platform for developing communication skills among students in higher education institutions. The instructional approach adopted in certain courses—particularly those involving the practical application of theoretical knowledge into spoken form—has been identified as a key element in cultivating strong communication abilities (Noor Lina et al., 2022). This method also enables students to gain a deeper understanding of linguistic structures and to apply them effectively in daily interactions (Ashmirul et al., 2023).

This is further supported by informant 9, who highlighted a subject that plays a significant role in providing students with opportunities to communicate in Arabic through structured dialogue sessions. The subject *Istima' wa Kalām* [Listening and Speaking], according to the informant, strikes a balance between theoretical understanding and practical oral usage. The informant expressed this as follows:

“For example, in Istima' wa Kalām (Listening and Speaking), dialogue sessions between teachers and peers help in mastering Arabic communication skills. It does not merely emphasize theory, such as nahw [grammar] and šarf [morphology], but also provides space for students to speak Arabic with confidence” (Informant 9).

The application of Arabic communication skills has a lasting impact on language mastery among learners. This point was highlighted by Informant 9, who explained that the instructional approach employed during their studies not only nurtured sustained interest in learning Arabic but also fostered the confidence to use the language effectively. This is reflected in the following statement:

“Learning in the Special Arabic Language Program (SALP) cultivated a genuine interest in continuing to study Arabic and made the learning process meaningful rather than burdensome. For instance, we participated in a program in Turkey during our undergraduate years. Many of the local residents, particularly near the Syrian border, spoke Arabic. We had to communicate in Arabic to engage with the people there. That experience demonstrated how SALP significantly helped us develop the ability to communicate in Arabic” (Informant 9).

In addition, several informants shared that they were also exposed to English as an essential medium of instruction, particularly in the context of international communication. Proficiency in English not only enhances employability in today's globalised job market but also facilitates broader access to academic resources and international engagement (Maznah & Faridah, 2023; Mohd Hasimi et al., 2017). Informant 3, during Focus Group Discussion 1, highlighted that the SALP curriculum does not only prioritise Arabic language skills but also places emphasis on English language proficiency. This was articulated in the following statement: *“The subjects in SALP follow a balanced curriculum that develops our communication skills. There's a listening and speaking course. But beyond that, we don't just learn Arabic, we also learn English, because English is important too, as the main global language”* (Informant 3). The implementation of both Arabic and English language proficiency shows that this program emphasizes current demands that require mastery of more than one language, enhancing students' competitiveness in the job market and developing human capital that can adapt to globalization.

In addition, classroom interaction also plays a vital role in enhancing communication skills through structured discussions and group-based activities (Nor Amalina & Farah Fazlinda, 2023). Strong communication skills enable students to articulate ideas clearly, actively listen to peers with empathy, and navigate interpersonal conflicts effectively (Mat Zizi et al., 2020). Moreover, such interactive learning environments promote critical thinking and foster the ability to collaborate productively in team settings (Safura Ahmad et al., 2022). This was reinforced by Informant 6, who noted that in-class discussions not only facilitated idea sharing but also broadened perspectives by exposing students to diverse viewpoints. The process, according to

the informant, cultivated mutual respect, tolerance, and teamwork. This was reflected in the following statement:

“Our own results and collaboration in class with friends indirectly foster cooperation and idea-sharing. If we answer alone, that’s just our view, but when we hear others’ opinions, we can get more than we could come up with on our own” (Informant 6).

In conclusion, student interaction within the classroom environment not only enhances communication proficiency but also promotes collaboration through the exchange of ideas and perspectives. Accordingly, the university functions as a crucial platform for developing students’ communication and interpersonal competencies.

Social Interaction Skills

Students are also equipped with social interaction skills through their participation in community and co-curricular activities. Involvement in extracurricular initiatives such as sports, clubs, and associations not only contributes to holistic personality development but also provides opportunities for students to engage with the broader community and gain exposure to real-world contexts (Amnah Saayah et al., 2020; Nor Aishah et al., 2022). These activities significantly enhance students’ social competencies by improving their ability to communicate effectively and establish meaningful relationships across diverse social settings (Anas Suzastri Ahmad & Hadijah Johari, 2022).

According to Nuntaboot et al. (2019), community engagement activities including social services, community outreach, and volunteerism that reflect a sense of civic responsibility and a commitment to supporting individuals and communities in need. Moreover, such involvement fosters essential life skills such as time management, teamwork, problem-solving, and intercultural communication (Colasante et al., 2020). These experiences not only broaden students’ perspectives but also contribute to the development of more mature, empathetic, and socially responsible individuals.

In an effort to strengthen the integration of soft skills in higher education, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has advocated embedding soft skills development within co-curricular programming. MoHE categorises co-curricular activities into eight core areas: volunteerism, culture, sports, leadership, public speaking, initiative and innovation, entrepreneurship, and community service (Mohamad Basri et al., 2021). This initiative aims to cultivate graduates who are not only professionally competent but also socially engaged and competitive in both the labour market and wider society.

Within the context of this study, informants shared that students were given extensive opportunities to participate in community and social activities, either directly or indirectly. For instance, informant 4 recounted their experience engaging in volunteer initiatives during their time in the Special Arabic Language Program (SALP). They described annual involvement in flood relief efforts, which included cleaning affected areas and providing support to fellow students impacted by natural disasters. This was expressed as follows:

“When I was a SALP student, we knew that Kelantan experienced floods every year. So, every year for two years during SALP and foundation studies, we joined volunteer programs to clean flood-affected areas. We also went to our classmates’ houses who were affected. We helped and supported them” (Informant 4).

Participation in such community-based activities illustrates that educational programs should not be limited to academic instruction alone, but should also serve as platforms for cultivating social consciousness and civic responsibility among students. Through these experiences, students not only acquire soft skills relevant for future professional and personal contexts, but also develop a heightened sense of empathy and compassion for those in need (Anas Suzastri & Hadijah Johari, 2022). This aligns with the National Education Philosophy (Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan), which emphasizes the holistic development of individuals

intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, physically, and socially in a balanced and integrated manner.

Students are also encouraged to actively participate in annual events such as *Eid al-Adha* (Qurban) and *iftar* gatherings. These events provide meaningful opportunities for students to engage more closely with lecturers and foster stronger interpersonal relationships. Informant 7 shared her experience as follows:

“...During Eid al-Adha, we didn’t return home because the break was short, so we joined a community activity. We helped with the sacrificial rites and broke fast at Ustaẓ X’s house. It became an annual tradition for SALP students” (Informant 7).

Such experiences offer students valuable cultural and religious exposure by allowing them to engage in faith-based practices within real-life settings. Participation in activities like *qurban* and *iftar* not only enhances students’ practical understanding of religious observance but also strengthens their appreciation for communal unity and cooperation (Amnah Saayah et al., 2023). Moreover, these interactions, conducted in a relaxed and informal setting, enable students to approach lecturers more comfortably, receive personal guidance, and develop essential social and interpersonal skills. These engagements ultimately contribute to character development and the cultivation of a well-rounded, socially aware graduate.

Beyond local engagement, students also had opportunities to participate in international programmes, which further enriched their personal and professional development. For instance, informant 4 shared that several students took part in a teaching programme at a *pondok* institution in Pattani, Thailand. The programme involved collaboration with Nilam Puri, whereby ten students including some from the SALP cohort were sent to teach Malay to Thai students in preparation for potential further studies in Malaysia. This experience was described as follows:

“Some of us joined a programme at the Pattani pondok in Thailand. The pondok collaborated with Nilam Puri, and students from Nilam Puri were sent, ten of them to teach Malay to Thai students as preparation if they wanted to study in Malaysia. Some of those students were from SALP” (Informant 4).

This account was further supported by informant 5, who personally participated in the programme. According to informant 5, the month-long teaching assignment in Thailand involved both instructional activities and participation in community-based events, offering firsthand experience in cross-cultural engagement. As expressed by the informant:

“...During my time, I was given the opportunity to go and teach in Thailand for a month. We also attended programmes there at the Pattani pondok, at the school with the Thai students” (Informant 05).

Such international experiences significantly contribute to the enhancement of students’ communication and social interaction skills while simultaneously expanding their global networks. These international connections offer strategic advantages by enabling students to engage with educators, academic institutions, and peers from different cultural contexts. Exposure to global educational settings broadens students’ perspectives, nurtures intercultural competence, and promotes visionary and mature thinking (Zainur Rijal et al., 2021).

Community-based activities hold a distinct and essential role within the context of higher education. Their significance is such that their implementation must continue even during disruptions to conventional learning environments, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ismail et al., 2021). As such, the prioritisation of community engagement initiatives should be emphasised by all higher education institutions to ensure the continued development of students’ soft skills.

In the context of this study, the importance of community engagement was highlighted by informant 3, who recommended the introduction of more community-focused programmes. The informant shared the following:

“We need to strengthen aspects like associations in SALP. Maybe we need to strengthen external activities because most of the usrah and meetings are common. But those more connected to the community... So, during

breaks, we should make full use of them. If, during SALP studies, we were busy with those things, I think it wouldn't be a waste. Or even be a volunteer in Zakat Center programs—we have ways to give back to them beyond just becoming teachers” (Informant 3).

This perspective underscores the considerable potential of educational programmes to enrich the student experience and foster the development of soft skills through meaningful community involvement. Therefore, greater emphasis should be placed on expanding student participation in community-based initiatives to ensure holistic graduate outcomes. Such efforts are consistent with the broader goals of higher education, which aim to produce graduates who are not only academically capable but also socially responsible.

Figure 1 below outlines suggested strategies for the effective implementation of community-based programmes in higher education institutions.

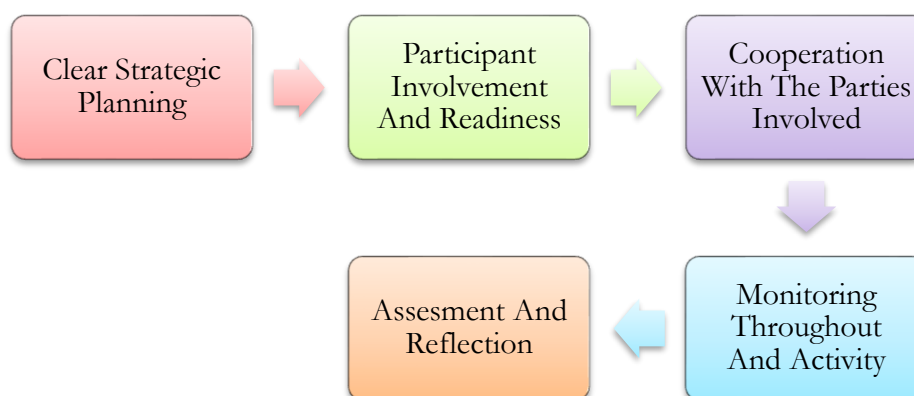


Figure 1: Methods for implementing community activities

(Source: Adapted from Amnah Saayah et al. (2023); Mohamad Basri et al. (2021))

In conclusion, the effective implementation of community-based activities necessitates strategic planning, active student participation, strong collaboration with relevant stakeholders, and continuous monitoring and evaluation. Emphasising these elements is essential to ensure that such initiatives deliver high-impact, holistic learning experiences that contribute meaningfully to the development of students' soft skills and overall personal growth.

Leadership Skills

The findings of this study also indicate that students are exposed to foundational leadership skills through their active participation in various student organisations and associations. Such involvement offers meaningful opportunities for students to strengthen their competencies in areas such as planning, team coordination, and strategic decision-making. These experiences contribute to the cultivation of leadership potential in alignment with the broader objectives of higher education. Table 2 below presents selected interview excerpts that demonstrate how the program fosters basic leadership skills among students:

Table 2. Exposure to Basic Leadership through Organizations

No.	Interview Excerpt Example	Informant
1	<i>“During our time in SALP, we had the HABIBAT association. So, when we joined SALP, we were already involved in these associations with their own lajnah, so we learned how to organize.”</i>	8

2	<i>“In terms of leadership, we also had bureaus under HABIBAT, and those helped us in developing leadership skills”</i>	2
3	<i>“...In SALP, we also had an organization called HABIBAT, the Assembly of Islamic Youth from Borneo and Thailand, which used to include Thai students. So indirectly, we developed our skills beyond just learning from the curriculum”</i>	6

This experience also contributes to the development of self-confidence and enhances students' interpersonal competencies. Participation in organisational activities functions not only as a platform for identity formation but also as a critical medium for cultivating leadership potential (Nor Aishah et al., 2022). Research indicates that students who are actively involved in student organisations tend to exhibit stronger leadership capabilities, as they are provided with opportunities to practise planning, decision-making, and team coordination (Rahifa Mustafa et al., 2019; Rorlinda Yusof et al., 2024). In essence, organisational involvement equips students with the essential skills required to become competitive and effective leaders.

Furthermore, co-curricular and supplementary programmes offer additional avenues for students to develop basic leadership skills. These platforms provide opportunities for students to assume leadership roles, such as serving as committee chairpersons, where they can enhance their communication, problem-solving, and event management abilities. This is supported by Nazeri Mohammad and Wan Ameran (2024), who emphasise that student engagement in activities beyond formal academic instruction contributes significantly to the formation of leadership competencies and promotes holistic personal development. Table 3 below presents selected excerpts from informants that reflect students' leadership experiences within the program:

Table 3. Exposure to Basic Leadership through SALP Side Programs

No.	Interview Excerpt Example	Informant	Program
1	<i>“For myself, I was on the committee for the Mukhayyam Lughawi program. So, the main skill I gained was leadership.”</i>	1	<i>Mukhayyam Lughawi</i>
2	<i>“I served twice as the director for a dinner program and an appointment ceremony. Those were leadership experiences for me”</i>	2	<i>Dinner and Majlis Watikah Pelantikan</i>
3	<i>“That program was fully run by us. So, it really built our leadership skills, like how to manage a program, such as the Rehlah Program, Visits to Lecturers' Homes, and many more”</i>	5	<i>Rehlah Program and Visits to Lecturers' Home</i>

Moreover, the document analysis of student programme reports corroborates the interview findings, confirming that students were actively engaged in developing fundamental leadership skills through various extracurricular initiatives. Figure 2 provides an overview of the key insights derived from the document analysis.



Figure 2: List of Programs in SALP

(Source: Document Analysis of SALP Reports, 2024)

Ultimately, students' involvement as committee members in student organisations and extracurricular programmes provides them with practical leadership experience. This includes managing specific bureaus, planning events, and contributing to decision-making processes within their respective organisations. Such engagement fosters not only organisational confidence but also critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability in various contexts (Wan Azhar & Wan Muhammad, 2021). Moreover, participation in supplementary programmes has been shown to correlate positively with the development of soft skills, particularly in areas such as leadership and organisational management (Nor Aishah et al., 2022). In essence, involvement in these activities contributes to the formation of responsible, disciplined, and collaborative individuals with strong leadership potential.

The long-term impact of such leadership experiences is evident in students' personal and professional growth. For example, informant 7 shared that they initially lacked interest in leadership roles. However, after engaging with the student association HABIBAT during their SALP studies, they came to appreciate the significance of leadership in both life and career. This experience not only increased their interest in leadership but also enhanced their confidence and ability to lead effectively—particularly in their current role as a secondary school teacher. As the informant explained:

"I learned a lot from SALP. I used to struggle to lead others and had no interest in leadership. But I had to learn it, because now I'm a teacher, so I must know how to lead" (Informant 7).

In addition, student involvement in leadership activities contributes significantly to preparing them for leadership roles at higher levels of education. These experiences support the development of essential interpersonal competencies, including effective communication, the ability to build professional relationships, and teamwork (Nik Yusri et al., 2020; Nurul Haidah et al., 2020). In the context of this study, the leadership experience gained through SALP has been shown to strengthen students' ability to apply these skills as they progress through their academic journeys. Informant 05 highlighted that the leadership foundations established during the SALP programme had a lasting influence, not only during the foundation years but throughout their undergraduate studies. As noted by the informant:

"SALP students aren't just academically active but also involved in co-curricular and leadership events. They are active during foundation and continue into their degree. Some even try to become members of the Student Representative Council here (MPP)" (Informant 6).

This observation suggests that students continue to excel in leadership at various academic levels, including through involvement in key student governance roles such as the MPP. This continued engagement reflects the long-term impact of leadership training within SALP. Informant 1, in Focus Group Discussion 3, supported this by noting that leadership

development within the programme prepares students to assume leadership responsibilities both nationally and internationally. The informant stated:

“As mentioned by informant 2, during SALP we were trained in leadership not only at the national level but also internationally. With this global leadership training, we naturally understand how leadership can be applied in various contexts, including in interactions with students from other countries. Previously, there was collaboration with Thailand, but now programmes are more focused on Borneo, Sabah, and Sarawak. Though still national in scale, they incorporate international relationship elements through broad leadership training and perspectives” (Informant 1).

These findings clearly demonstrate that students benefit from leadership experiences at both national and international levels. This aligns with the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia’s (MOHE) agenda for the internationalisation of higher education, which emphasises strengthening academic and professional networks across borders to enhance student competency and expand leadership perspectives (I. W. Othman et al., 2017; Rashid et al., 2024). The university’s vision of becoming a world-class institution further reinforces this direction by emphasising leadership development grounded in global perspectives, strategic thinking, and adaptability across diverse leadership contexts.

In conclusion, the leadership experience acquired during SALP not only supports students throughout their academic progression but also has long-term impacts in shaping effective, visionary, and globally-minded leaders. Figure 3 below summarises the long-term leadership outcomes fostered by the SALP programme.

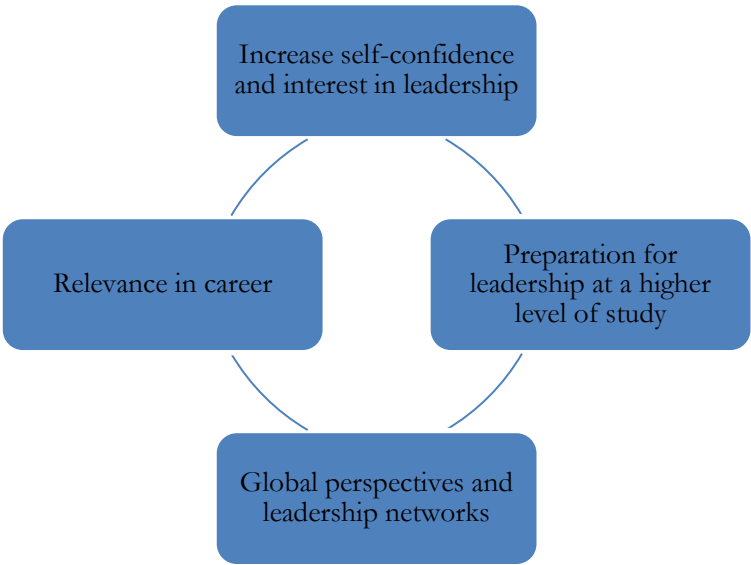


Figure 3: Long-term Impact of the Program on Student Leadership
(Source: Author’s Analysis, 2024)

Therefore, systematic leadership training and real-world exposure are essential to better equip students for future academic and career challenges (Ahmad et al., 2021; Zulkifeli et al., 2022). To ensure that educational programmes remain relevant and impactful in shaping future leaders, continuous enhancement and refinement are necessary. Such improvements will help guarantee that the experiences offered to students are both meaningful and capable of producing long-term developmental benefits.

Entrepreneurial Skills

Entrepreneurial skills are among the core soft skills identified as essential for preparing students to meet global challenges and thrive in real-world settings (Ling et al., 2020). At the international level, UNESCO-UNEVOC has highlighted entrepreneurship development as a strategic initiative to address youth unemployment (Lindner, 2020; Salwani Daud & Mohd Safarin, 2023). Entrepreneurial education is now part of the global agenda, recognised as a vital mechanism for empowering human capital, driving economic growth, and enhancing individual competitiveness in an increasingly demanding labour market (Mack et al., 2019, 2021; Mawonedzo et al., 2021; Mayombe, 2020).

Malaysia has also taken proactive steps to align with this agenda, particularly within the higher education sector. The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has introduced a range of policies aimed at fostering entrepreneurial development among students. These include the Higher Education Institution (HEI) Entrepreneurship Development Policy 2010, the HEI Entrepreneurship Action Plan 2016–2020, the National Entrepreneurship Policy 2030, and the HEI Entrepreneurship Action Plan 2021–2025 (Nur Hanan & Noor Azuddin, 2023). These initiatives reflect the government’s strong commitment to producing graduates equipped with robust entrepreneurial competencies. Accordingly, universities are expected to play a pivotal role in providing students with the knowledge, skills, and practical experience necessary for entrepreneurial success (Noor Aznaim et al., 2021; Norain et al., 2019; Norazlinda & Surendran, 2021).

Within the context of this study, informants reported active participation in entrepreneurial activities during their studies, primarily through student associations and organisational initiatives. Informant 2, for example, described involvement in a variety of entrepreneurial ventures, including food sales, drop shipping, and grocery distribution. This was shared as follows:

“I was part of the entrepreneurship bureau, and we were called ‘economy.’ Our activities focused on entrepreneurship; every week we sold something. Sometimes we cooked, sometimes we didn’t. Sometimes we sold drop-shipped products, and consistently, we sold groceries daily. The money was partly from the association and partly from our own capital for bureau activities. Individually, we also managed our own resources” (Informant 2). Their involvement in entrepreneurship not only provided income opportunities but also played a vital role in developing other skills such as financial management, planning, and marketing.

According to Informant 6, students actively contributed to generating income for their organisations. The ability to raise funds independently enabled them to plan and execute activities more effectively and sustainably (Azliza Yusop & Suriati Ahmad, 2020; Haron et al., 2022). This experience also encouraged the development of creativity and critical thinking, as students were required to manage fundraising initiatives efficiently. As expressed by the informant:

“Usually, we raise our own funds because there’s an organisation. So we can earn our own money and carry out various activities from the collections” (Informant 6). Well-managed funding practices support systematic financial growth while reducing the risk of financial loss (Farah Lyana & Siti Asma’, 2022). Through their involvement in securing and managing funds for association activities, students also developed financial literacy and planning skills. Informant 7 explained that this experience heightened their awareness of budgeting and fundraising processes:

“...Many HABIBAT programs needed funding. So, we were the ‘economy team’, the ones who raised money. We did many activities. I learned a lot from that experience” (Informant 7).

These findings are further supported by document analysis, which indicates that students actively engaged in fundraising efforts for various programmes. Examples of these initiatives are summarised in Table 5 below.

Table 4: List of Programs and Funding Sources

No	Pogram Name	Participants	Funding Sources
1.	Visual Mastery Canva and Video Workshop (2024)	1. Islamic Studies Foundation Students 2. SALP Students 3. Diploma Students (UMCced)	Corporate sponsorship, donations, participation fees
2.	Jaulah Terengganu Program (2024)	HABIBAT Students	Corporate sponsorship and donations
3.	Mukbhayyam Jati Diri Program (2024)	SALP students	Allocations and donations

(Source: Document Analysis of SALP Program Reports, 2024)

Informant 3 highlighted the frequency of student-led efforts to secure funding through various channels, stating: “*Mostly we would deal with lecturers or look for outside funds, set our own budgets, sell things, or collect contributions*” (Informant 3). Beyond addressing financial needs, entrepreneurship and fundraising activities offered valuable experiential learning opportunities. Through these efforts, students developed essential skills in resource management, communication, and public engagement (Anuar & Sahid, 2020). Informant 5 shared that involvement in fundraising significantly enhanced their confidence and communication abilities:

“*...We looked for funding wherever we could sometimes our own money, or we applied for support. We often approached shops to ask for donations. It helped us develop communication skills and confidence. These activities, which required funding, really helped us build our character*” (Informant 5).

These accounts illustrate that fundraising activities not only supported programme implementation but also played a significant role in developing students’ soft skills. The process provided opportunities to articulate ideas clearly, engage with stakeholders, and build negotiation and persuasion skills competencies that are essential for career readiness in today’s competitive job market (Azmi, 2023; M. Othman et al., 2023).

This was further supported by informant 1 in Focus Group Discussion 4, who reflected on the long-term value of financial and entrepreneurial exposure:

“*...The next skill I think is also important is financial management. When we run programs, we need that skill. We interact with outside parties, seek sponsors... it really added valuable experience for me*” (Informant 1). These experiences contributed meaningfully to student maturity in handling finances and reinforced their understanding of economic stability and resource management within an organisational context. Islam also views entrepreneurship as a beneficial field for the Muslim ummah (Khaulah Hilaluddin et al., 2024). From an Islamic perspective, entrepreneurship is not merely an economic effort for profit but also a form of worship and social responsibility requiring honesty, integrity, and blessing in all transactions. Islam recognizes trade as a lawful means of earning, as stated by Allah SWT:

وَأَحَلَّ اللَّهُ الْبَيْعَ وَحَرَّمَ الرِّبَا

But Allah has permitted trading and forbidden interest. (Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:275).

According to Ibn Kathir, the verse rebukes those who equated trade with usury, affirming that Islam encourages trade and entrepreneurship while simultaneously establishing clear ethical boundaries in business practices. Historically, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) himself was a

successful entrepreneur, widely known for his honesty and integrity in trade (Suhaila Nadzri et al., 2021). Prominent companions such as ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Awf and ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān were also renowned for their entrepreneurial success and their dedication to using wealth for the benefit of the ummah (Khaulah et al., 2024; Syahrina & Mohamad Khadafi, 2023).

In the context of this study, students’ involvement in fund management and entrepreneurial activities not only facilitated the development of essential soft skills but also reflected key principles of Islamic entrepreneurship, which emphasize a balance between profit-making and adherence to moral and religious values. As such, the integration of entrepreneurship elements within educational programmes represents a learning process deeply rooted in Islamic ethics that shapes students’ character and should be continuously cultivated.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the integration of soft skills within Islamic higher education institutions with a particular focus on the Special Arabic Language Program (SALP). The findings indicate that the impact of soft skill integration is more significant than initially anticipated. This challenges the traditional assumption that soft skills are peripheral to academic learning and underscores their importance in nurturing graduates who are intellectually capable, emotionally mature, spiritually grounded and socially responsible. Student participation in academic activities, leadership roles, entrepreneurship and co-curricular programmes has contributed meaningfully to the development of communication, problem solving and decision making competencies. In addition, involvement in community engagement activities such as volunteering, student entrepreneurship and participation in student organisations has strengthened students’ abilities to lead, manage programmes and interact effectively within diverse societal and cultural contexts at both national and international levels.

A distinctive feature of the SALP is its emphasis on Islamic values as a foundation for personal and professional development. These values are embedded throughout the learning experience and help to shape ethical awareness, moral character and a sense of accountability. As a result, the programme produces graduates who are not only academically prepared but also guided by principles that support responsible citizenship and ethical leadership in various sectors of society. Beyond confirming the relevance of holistic education, this study offers a meaningful contribution to the academic discourse by introducing a culturally grounded framework for soft skill development. Rooted in Islamic values, this framework broadens the perspective on how spiritual and ethical principles can be integrated into higher education. It challenges conventional approaches that often separate academic achievement from character development and encourages further discussion on value-based education as a viable model for cultivating well-rounded graduates.

Nonetheless, this study is subject to certain limitations. The research was conducted within a specific institutional context with a relatively small sample size which may restrict the general application of its findings. Furthermore, factors such as gender, age and programme diversity were not examined in depth. Future studies involving broader and more varied samples across multiple institutions are recommended to validate and extend the current findings. In conclusion, higher education institutions are encouraged to adopt a systematic and structured approach to soft skill development. This requires meaningful collaboration among university leadership, academic staff, industry stakeholders and the wider community. A comprehensive framework of this nature is essential to produce graduates who are not only competent and adaptable but also ethically conscious and socially engaged. Such graduates will be well equipped to contribute to national development and to the intellectual and moral progress of the ummah.

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