

Synergizing Early Childhood Education Management and Higher Education: A Path to Enhanced Business Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Indonesia faces critical challenges, including limited financial resources, inadequate managerial support, and weak marketing strategies, which hinder the sustainable growth of ECE institutions. This study proposes a collaborative business management model between ECE institutions and universities to address these issues. The research employed a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) approach, involving 15 participants comprising ECE managers and university representatives. Discussions centered on operational challenges faced by ECE institutions and the potential for universities, leveraging their expertise in business, research, and student engagement, to provide strategic managerial and financial support. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to design a collaborative model. The findings revealed that universities can play a pivotal role in addressing ECE management constraints by offering expertise in marketing strategies, financial planning, and operational management. The proposed model emphasizes mutual benefits, with universities enhancing their community engagement and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), while ECE institutions receive essential support to improve educational quality and sustainability. This study addresses a gap in the literature by demonstrating the feasibility and advantages of university-ECE partnerships. Such collaborations can transform both sectors by fostering cross-sector policies, improving community development, and enhancing educational outcomes. The collaborative model offers a strategic solution to ECE sustainability challenges in Indonesia. Future efforts should focus on policy frameworks to support these partnerships, enabling broader implementation and long-term impact on educational and societal advancement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Examining schools from a business perspective involves recognizing the increasing integration of business principles and practices into the educational environment. This trend is evident in the appointment of skilled professionals from the business community to school governing bodies, where they bring managerial and educational knowledge to transform governance practices and improve school performance (Dobson, Rose, Parton, & Hart, 2020). Analyzing ECE (Early Childhood Education or Early Childhood Education) schools from a business perspective considers various factors such as curriculum development, risk management, professional qualifications, technology integration, and ethical responsibilities.

ECE represents a crucial stage in child development, providing education and care services for children from birth to six years old, with the goal of establishing a strong foundation for future academic, social, emotional, and life skills (Sartika & Wulandari, 2023). The successful implementation of ECE requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and communities, who collectively play a vital role in ensuring its effectiveness (Angkur, 2022). As the child's first educational setting, the family environment significantly influences their development. Parents not only provide material support but also act as role models, shaping children's behavior, character, and morals (Ahmad Rifai, Husin, Fatimah, & Abdul Rashid bin Abdul Aziz, 2022). To enhance the quality of ECE, it is essential to adopt effective learning strategies that emphasize play, singing, and active engagement, which are fundamental to early childhood education (Yuliartina, 2021).

Universities play an important role in this ecosystem by providing education and training for future early childhood educators and paraprofessionals. These institutions offer programs that equip educators with the necessary content knowledge and skills to work effectively with young children, thereby contributing to the overall quality of early childhood education (D'Amico, Algozzine, Algozzine, Correa, & Muharib, 2019). However, does the role of universities in this regard only focus on creating educators for ECE schools?

This study addresses the question: How can universities and ECE institutions collaborate in a business management model to enhance sustainability and operational success? It proposes a model where universities act as strategic partners, providing support in financial management, marketing, and operational strategy. Universities play a multifaceted role in school business development, serving as hubs for management education, workforce preparation, and economic advancement. For instance, Henley Management College emphasizes improving management expertise through targeted programs, directly contributing to organizational development (Galpin & Birchall, 1996). This aligns with the theory of collaborative advantage (Huxham & Vangen, 2013), which highlights the value organizations can create by pooling complementary resources and expertise. Universities, with their academic and business resources, are uniquely positioned to enhance business management practices in ECE. To guide such partnerships, a strategic institutional framework is essential (Droissart & Tuytens, 2024). This framework should promote faculty collaboration, professional development, and the integration of business practices within educational settings. Grounded in systems theory, it recognizes the interconnectivity of educational institutions and their potential to achieve synergistic outcomes through effective collaboration. Research supports the view that strategic partnerships between universities and schools improve teaching quality, optimize resources, and enhance operational efficiency.

The trend of cooperation between universities and ECE in Indonesia reflects a broader movement toward enhancing education quality and community service through cross-sector collaborations. Universities are increasingly forming partnerships with various educational institutions, including ECE centers, to leverage their expertise and resources for mutual benefit. For example, Bhayangkara University, Greater Jakarta, has initiated a knowledge-sharing and practicum collaboration with Al Wildan 10 School, an International Islamic School, to enhance learning systems and practicum management, offering a model for similar partnerships with ECE institutions (Muhendra, Solihin, Saputra, & Rukmayadi, 2023). This collaboration embodies the Triple Bottom Line framework (Elkington

& Hartigan, 2008), where the integration of educational, economic, and social outcomes is essential for long-term sustainability in both sectors.

In addition, the entrepreneurial university concept underscores the importance of universities acquiring new knowledge assets through collaboration with external entities, including other educational institutions. This is crucial for fostering innovation and sustainability in education (Arimbawa, Wedashwara, Zubaidi, & Jatmika, 2023). The rise of corporate universities in Indonesia, which adopt more innovative, practical, and industry-relevant learning techniques, signals a shift that may influence how universities collaborate with ECE centers to improve early childhood education (Febriansyah, Labdhagati, & Anggara, 2020). These concepts align with knowledge management theory (Torraco, 2000) which suggests that universities, as knowledge hubs, play a critical role in disseminating new ideas and practices that enhance educational quality and sustainability.

Existing research on collaboration in education demonstrates that such partnerships can significantly improve institutional performance. For instance, collaborative management theories suggest that multi-stakeholder decision-making, where universities and ECE institutions jointly address challenges, enhances both institutional quality and sustainability (Rasidi et al., 2022). The concept of collaboration has evolved from merely exchanging information to a deeper level of proactive communication and teamwork, where project leaders ensure that all parties work cohesively towards a shared goal (Schäfer, 2020). However, there remains a gap in the literature regarding models of collaboration that integrate both educational and business practices, particularly in the context of foundational education like ECE. Existing models, such as those in vocational education or corporate training, tend to focus on industry-specific outcomes rather than addressing the unique needs of early childhood education. Moreover, while global examples of successful collaborative leadership highlight the benefits of such partnerships, few studies have examined how higher education institutions in Indonesia can specifically support the economic viability and service quality of ECE institutions.

The collaborative business management model proposed in this study has the potential to set a precedent for educational partnerships that extend beyond the traditional academic focus, fostering a symbiotic relationship between ECE institutions and higher education. This research highlights the need for targeted policies that promote cross-sector collaborations and underscores the potential for a transformative impact on ECE sustainability and the broader educational landscape in Indonesia.

2. METHODS

2.1 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, specifically a case study design, which allows for an in-depth exploration of the collaborative business management model between ECE institutions and universities. The case study approach is particularly suited to this research as it enables a focused examination of the unique dynamics within this partnership, capturing the complexities and specific interactions involved. A qualitative approach is ideal for this study, as it provides a nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives, experiences, and challenges, which is essential when investigating collaborative models that are context-dependent and interaction-focused. This approach is defined by its focus on a single limited system or case, allowing for an in-depth examination of complex phenomena in their context (Miksza et al., 2023).

2.2 Data Collection Method and Procedure

The data was collected over a period of three months through a series of three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), each lasting approximately two hours. The FGDs were structured to address different themes essential to the study: the financial, managerial, and marketing challenges faced by ECE institutions and the potential areas where university support could be most effective. Each session was guided by predetermined open-ended questions that encouraged participants to share their experiences and viewpoints.

To ensure rich and unbiased discussions, the FGDs were moderated carefully by a researcher trained in qualitative facilitation. The moderator maintained neutrality, refraining from expressing opinions and instead focusing on prompting participants with follow-up questions for deeper insights. This approach minimized bias and fostered an environment where participants felt comfortable sharing both positive and critical perspectives. The moderator also ensured balanced participation, prompting quieter members to contribute and managing dominant voices to allow diverse viewpoints.

2.3 Participant

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a focused yet comprehensive representation of the key stakeholders involved in the ECE-university collaboration. The sample consisted of 15 participants, including ECE managers and university officials, chosen based on their active involvement in ECE management or their role in supporting educational partnerships at their respective universities. Criteria for selection included professional experience in ECE management for the ECE participants, and for the university officials. Their roles needed to include responsibilities related to educational policy or strategic partnerships. This purposive sampling method allowed the study to concentrate on individuals with direct, relevant experience, ensuring that the data gathered was highly relevant to the study's objectives.

2.4 Data Transcription, Verification, and Analysis

Following each FGD, discussions were transcribed verbatim to capture every detail accurately. To verify transcript accuracy, the audio recordings were cross-referenced with the transcriptions, ensuring that all statements were faithfully recorded. Additionally, participants were invited to review their respective transcripts, allowing them to confirm or clarify their statements, which strengthened data reliability and minimized potential misinterpretations.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach. Thematic analysis is often used in qualitative research designs that aim to reveal holistic contextual phenomena by collecting data and utilizing the researcher as the key instrument (Adlini, Dinda, Yulinda, Chotimah, & Merliyana, 2022; Fadli, 2021). Initial codes were generated by reading through the transcripts line-by-line and identifying recurrent ideas and keywords. These initial codes were then grouped into broader themes through a collaborative review process, during which the research team refined and reorganized codes to ensure they represented the core findings. The final themes were selected based on their relevance to the study's objectives, focusing on insights into collaborative support, financial stability, and operational management challenges within ECE institutions.

To enhance the study's validity, triangulation was applied by comparing insights across the different FGDs and participant groups. Quotes from participants were used to support key themes, providing direct evidence of the challenges and benefits identified in the analysis. These quotes were chosen for their relevance and clarity, allowing participants' voices to substantiate the thematic findings and add authenticity to the analysis.

2.6 Credibility and Validity

To ensure the credibility and validity of the data, this research applies a member-checking technique by confirming the findings and interpretations with several informants to ensure that the results of the analysis are in line with their experiences and views. The description of the research results will also be accompanied by quotes from the informants during the FGD process.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Constraints In ECE Business Management

Constraint analysis is an important part of making strategic decisions in managing a collaborative business. Based on the results of the interviews, at least discussion points were found including (a) limited financial resources, (b) less strong managerial support, and (c) challenges in marketing and

increasing the number of students. These points are further elaborated to obtain more complete information related to constraints in ECE business management.

Limited financial resources are one of the most prominent constraints faced by private ECE managers. This challenge mainly arises due to the reliance on irregular payments from parents, resulting in unstable cash flow. One ECE manager revealed, *"We often have difficulty maintaining cash flow, especially when payments from parents are not smooth. In fact, operational costs such as teachers' salaries and facility maintenance must continue to run (ECE_1)."* This situation shows how important consistent income is to maintain the financial stability of the institution.

The impact of this financial instability is quite widespread, affecting ECE's ability to make necessary investments in educational facilities, learning aids, and professional development programs for staff. Another manager added, *"We have postponed the purchase of teaching aids and facility development several times due to insufficient funds. We must prioritize daily operational needs (ECE 1)."* This shows that financial constraints not only limit daily operations but also hamper efforts to improve the quality of education services in ECE.

In addition, limited funding also has an impact on the quality of education that can be provided. For example, some managers stated that they cannot conduct regular training for teachers to improve their competencies due to insufficient funding. *"We would love to organize regular training for our teachers, but with the existing budget, it is very difficult to do, (ECE 2)"* said one manager. This certainly affects the quality of education provided to students, as improving teacher competence is one of the key factors in developing quality education.

Limited funding is often a major barrier for private educational institutions in maintaining and improving the quality of their services (Venkatesh, Rao, Kumar, & Chari, 2022). Continued financial difficulties can lead to a decline in the quality of education services, which in turn will affect the school's reputation and its attractiveness to prospective students. Thus, limited financial resources are not only an operational issue but also a strategic challenge that affects the long-term sustainability of ECE.

The lack of strong managerial support is a significant problem faced by many private ECE managers. Many of them must perform various roles simultaneously, from managing finances, developing the curriculum, to marketing the school. This situation makes the workload very heavy, as expressed by one ECE manager, *"We must be financial managers, teachers, as well as marketing. This is certainly not easy and very draining (ECE 1)."* This combination of roles often overwhelms managers and reduces their effectiveness in performing managerial functions well.

This high workload means that managers are often caught up in daily operations and do not have enough time or energy to think strategically. *"Because we are too busy with daily tasks, we are less focused on the long-term development of the school (ECE 1)."* explained one manager. This condition certainly has a negative impact on the school's ability to grow and compete amidst the increasingly fierce competition in the education sector. With limited human resources, management focus is often divided, which in turn reduces the quality of decision-making and innovation in schools.

The lack of adequate managerial support also affects staff motivation and job satisfaction. Some managers admit that they cannot give enough attention to teachers and other staff, especially in terms of their professional development and welfare. *"Sometimes we feel guilty because we can't give more attention to the teachers. They need guidance and training, but we ourselves are already too busy with management affairs (ECE 3),"* said one ECE manager. This shows that a lack of managerial support not only affects operational performance, but also impacts on staff morale and productivity.

Strong managerial support is important for the successful management of educational institutions. This support includes aspects such as managerial training, development of leadership skills, and guidance in strategic decision-making. The sustainability of educational institutions is closely linked to the applied managerial system, where good management patterns and resource utilization enable institutions to adapt to environmental changes (Muttaqien, 2021). Without adequate support, ECE managers will continue to face challenges in optimizing school performance and maintaining the

quality of education provided. Therefore, managerial capacity building through training and external support is an urgent need for the sustainability of ECE institutions.

In addition to financial and managerial issues, challenges in marketing and increasing student numbers are also a major concern for ECE managers. During increasingly fierce competition with other educational institutions, some managers admitted to difficulties in marketing their schools and attracting new students. One ECE manager revealed, *"Attracting new students is difficult, especially when other schools also offer similar programs. Sometimes we feel that we are losing the competition due to the lack of effective marketing strategies."* (ECE_2) This statement illustrates how important effective marketing is in attracting parents to enroll their children in ECE.

Limitations in marketing are often caused by a lack of resources, both in terms of finance and manpower skilled in marketing. *"We don't have a dedicated team to handle marketing, so everything must be done by ourselves. Sometimes we also feel like we don't know where to start,"* (ECE_1) said one ECE manager. This inability to conduct professional marketing makes ECE often invisible during competition, which results in a decline in student numbers and ultimately affects the school's income.

In addition, some managers also find it difficult to identify what parents really want when choosing ECE for their children. *"We are often confused; are the programs we offer in line with parents' expectations? Or is there something that needs to be added?"* said one manager. This lack of understanding of market preferences means that marketing strategies are often misdirected and ineffective in attracting prospective students.

An effective marketing strategy is critical to attracting new students and sustaining ECE. Research shows that ECE institutions should synergize various elements such as teachers, guardians, and stakeholders to effectively manage the marketing of education services, which improves competitiveness and quality of graduates (Sulistiyorini, 2023). Difficulties in marketing can result in a decline in student numbers, which in turn impacts on ECE income and financial stability. Therefore, ECE managers need to develop a more structured marketing strategy supported by in-depth market knowledge to compete effectively in an increasingly competitive education market.

3.2 Problem-Solving Efforts and The Need For External Involvement

Private ECE managers often rely on internal efforts to overcome the constraints they face, especially in terms of limited financial and managerial resources. One common strategy is tighter financial management, by adjusting budgets and cutting operational costs that are deemed unnecessary. *"We try to cut costs here and there and be more selective in spending. But this is not a long-term solution,"* (ECE_1) said one manager. These efforts aim to maintain financial stability in the short term, although they are often not enough to solve the problem entirely.

In addition to financial management, managers also try to optimize existing resources by improving operational efficiency. They tend to do more tasks themselves, although this often comes at the expense of time and energy that could be used for other, more strategic activities. *"Some staff and I must double up on tasks to save costs. We even reduce the frequency of purchasing teaching materials and utilize used materials that can be reprocessed"* (ECE_1), said one ECE manager. However, while this helps ease the financial burden, its impact is often limited and cannot be relied upon as a long-term solution.

Some staff are also trying to increase revenue by developing additional programs that can generate money, such as paid courses or extracurricular activities. *"We started offering extra courses such as foreign languages and arts to increase our income. But not all parents are willing to pay extra for these activities,"* (ECE_3) said one ECE staff. While these are good initiatives, the challenges of attracting parental participation and limited time and resources are often significant obstacles.

However, these internal efforts, while important, are often insufficient to address the larger underlying issues. Internal approaches are often merely reactive and unable to address the structural challenges faced by educational institutions, such as limited funding and lack of managerial support (Giannini, 2015). Therefore, despite some successes in cost management and income generation, ECE managers still need more comprehensive and sustainable solutions.

ECE managers are beginning to realize that to truly overcome the various constraints, they need support from external parties. One potential solution being considered is to establish partnerships with universities. Support from universities is considered to help address more complex issues, such as financial management, marketing, and curriculum development. *"We need help with management and marketing. Universities have the resources and knowledge that can help us grow, (ECE-1)"* said one manager.

Collaboration with universities offers several advantages that cannot be achieved through internal efforts alone. For example, universities can provide managerial training and guidance, which ECE managers desperately need to improve their capacity to manage their schools. *"We need training in school management and management. If the college can help us with this, it will help us a lot, (ECE 3)"*. In addition, universities can also help with marketing, for example by utilizing their networks and resources to promote ECE to prospective parents.

In addition to managerial and marketing aspects, curriculum development is also one area in which universities can make a significant contribution. *"We want a more innovative and up-to-date curriculum. With the college's help, we can update the learning program and adapt it to the needs of today's students (ECE_2)"* explained one manager. This support not only helps ECE improve the quality of education they offer, but also increases their competitiveness amidst increasingly fierce competition.

A study confirms that partnerships with higher education institutions such as ECE can provide significant benefits to private education institutions (Nurdin & Shidiq, 2024). Support from universities can cover a variety of aspects, from managerial training to the development of innovative programs, all of which can help address the barriers facing ECE (Tepi Mulyaniapi, Johar Permana, Soemarto, & Diding Nurdin, 2023). Therefore, ECE managers are strongly advised to actively seek and utilize partnership opportunities with universities as part of their long-term strategy.

3.3 The Role of Universities As Strategic Partners

The need for ECE school business managers to external parties can be filled with the presence of universities. The results of data analysis found that (a) support in management and marketing, (b) potential economic benefits through collaboration, and (c) the implications of achieving the college's KPIs are points that allow for management collaboration as an answer to the business needs of ECE schools.

Universities have a strategic role in helping ECEs overcome the various obstacles they face, especially in the aspects of management and marketing. This support can take the form of managerial training that aims to increase the capacity of ECE managers in managing their schools more effectively. *"If we can work with universities, we hope they can help us develop a more innovative curriculum and also provide training for our teachers, (ECE_1)"* said one ECE manager. This training can cover various aspects, from financial management, strategic decision-making, to developing more innovative and relevant learning programs.

In addition to managerial training, universities can also help ECE centers with marketing. In the context of fierce competition in the education sector, the ability to market schools effectively is crucial. Colleges can help design better marketing strategies using data-driven approaches and market research. *"We have difficulties in marketing the school, especially in attracting new students. If the university can help us with marketing, that would be very helpful, (ECE-1)"*. This support could be in the form of developing promotional materials, using digital media, and utilizing the university's network of alumni and partners to expand ECE's marketing reach.

Another benefit that universities can provide is in curriculum development. As higher education institutions, universities have access to the latest research and innovations in education that can be applied in ECE. *"We want a curriculum that is more in line with the times, and the university can help us create a more interesting and effective learning program (ECE_3),"* explained one ECE staff. With this collaboration, ECE can adopt a more modern and relevant approach to learning, which not only improves the quality of education but also attracts parents.

Research has shown that partnerships between universities and private educational institutions such as ECE can bring significant benefits (Ansari, 2023). Support from universities not only helps in improving managerial capacity but also provides access to wider resources, which in turn can improve the performance and sustainability of ECE. Therefore, universities act as strategic partners that can assist ECE in overcoming challenges and improving the quality of services they offer.

Cooperation between universities and ECE not only provides benefits in managerial and curriculum aspects, but also has the potential to generate economic benefits for both parties. One of the main benefits that ECE can gain from this collaboration is improved financial management efficiency. With the support of universities, ECE can develop a better and more efficient financial management system, which in turn can improve the financial stability of the school. *"With guidance from universities, we can be more efficient in financial management, and this will certainly have a positive impact on our financial condition, (ECE_1)"* said an ECE manager.

In addition, this collaboration also opens opportunities for ECE to develop profitable paid programs, such as additional courses or extracurricular programs. Universities can assist ECE in designing and marketing these programs, thus attracting more participants and increasing school revenue. *"We hope that with the support of the university, we can offer additional programs that are interesting and profitable, so that it can increase the school's income,"* said one ECE manager.

From the university's perspective, the economic benefits of this collaboration are also significant. Colleges can expand their network and client base, which not only enhances their reputation but also opens new revenue opportunities. For example, colleges can offer paid training or consulting programs to ECE and other educational institutions. *"This collaboration could be an opportunity for us to expand our services, such as training or consulting that could have a positive economic impact for the college, (PT_3)"* explained a representative from the college.

This collaboration also has the potential to create synergies in the development of innovative programs that can be sold or marketed to other educational institutions, thus providing greater economic benefits for the college. In addition, these partnerships can also strengthen relationships with local communities, which in turn can increase the attractiveness of the college in the eyes of prospective students and other potential partners.

In addition to direct economic benefits, partnerships between ECE and universities also have positive implications for the achievement of university Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Colleges that are active in collaborative programs with educational institutions such as ECE can increase their contribution to community development, which is one of the important aspects of KPIs. *"This partnership can help us achieve some of our KPIs, especially those related to social contribution and community development, (PT_1)"* said a college representative.

By participating in programs that have a direct impact on the community, colleges can enhance their reputation as institutions that care about and contribute to the development of education at the basic level. This not only helps in achieving KPIs but also strengthens the position of universities as reliable partners in efforts to improve the overall quality of education. This finding is in line with studies that have shown that one of the forms of achieving KPIs in Indonesia is the applicability of research results in the real world, including in this case partners who use the science and technology resulting from research from higher education institutions (Kurniadi, 2023; Kurniadi, Arpizal, Fajarsari, Yaldi, & Mayasari, 2023; Kurniadi, Sulistiyo, Yaldi, & Ekasari, 2023).

In addition, this collaboration also opens opportunities for universities to conduct research and development (R&D) that is relevant to the real needs in the field. *"We can conduct joint research that not only benefits ECE, but also contributes to the academic world and the achievement of our KPIs, (PT_2)"* added the college representative. Involvement in this applicable research can also be an added value in the accreditation process and assessment of university performance.

Thus, these partnerships not only provide economic benefits but also support the achievement of KPIs, ultimately improving the competitiveness and quality of the universities themselves. This finding is in line with previous research which shows that collaboration with other educational institutions can

improve college performance in terms of social contribution and community development. (Perrotti, Longo, Plaut, & Bush, 2024).

3.4 Collaboration Management Model

The collaboration between Early Childhood Education (ECE) institutions and universities presents a strategic opportunity to address various challenges faced by the basic education sector. ECE institutions often operate with limited resources, particularly in terms of finance, management, and marketing. On the other hand, universities have the capacity to provide diverse expertise and resources, ranging from research and consultation to training. Through synergy between both parties, it is expected that the quality and sustainability of ECE operations will improve while also positively contributing to universities achieving their Key Performance Indicators (IKU).

The collaborative business model between ECE and universities integrates the expertise and resources of both parties to enhance the sustainability of ECE operations. ECE institutions frequently face resource limitations, especially in finance, management, and marketing. In this model (Figure 1), universities act as strategic partners, providing solutions through managerial consultations, marketing strategies, and financial assistance. This not only helps ECE overcome daily challenges but also gives them a higher competitive edge in the market.

From the university's perspective, this collaboration offers benefits in achieving Key Performance Indicators (IKU) such as social contribution and community development. Universities can use this opportunity to involve lecturers and students in community service activities and research relevant to ECE development. Moreover, students can participate in practical projects, such as developing marketing strategies or managing finances, which enrich their learning experiences.



Figure 1. Early Childhood Education-Higher Education Collaboration Model

The main benefit of this collaboration is the creation of a mutually supportive ecosystem, where ECEs receive practical solutions for their operational issues, while universities can enhance their social role and broaden their impact on society. Therefore, this model not only strengthens ECE's sustainability but also increases the relevance and contribution of universities to basic education in Indonesia.

The proposed collaboration model between universities and ECE institutions can be operationalized through a structured, phased approach. The first phase involves conducting a comprehensive needs assessment through focus group discussions (FGDs) with ECE managers to identify key challenges, such as financial instability, gaps in managerial capacity, and ineffective

marketing strategies. Following this, a steering committee comprising university representatives and ECE managers is established to align goals, define roles, and set measurable key performance indicators (KPIs) that reflect mutual objectives.

In the second phase, resource mobilization and capacity building become the primary focus. Universities can share resources such as faculty expertise, student interns, and technological tools. Faculty from management programs can provide training in financial planning, strategic decision-making, and marketing strategies tailored to ECE needs. Students, through internship programs, may assist in developing marketing campaigns, managing financial records, and conducting operational audits. Additionally, universities can introduce digital tools like budget management software and marketing analytics platforms, customized for ECE operations. To further build capacity, universities can offer tailored workshops addressing critical areas such as cash flow management, digital marketing, and curriculum innovation.

The third phase emphasizes pilot testing and iterative improvement. The partnership can begin with a pilot project involving a small group of ECE centers, where universities provide targeted managerial and operational support. Progress is monitored monthly using KPIs, such as increased enrollment, cost savings, and improved teacher satisfaction. Feedback from these pilots allows the model to be refined and adjusted to better meet the needs of both parties.

Finally, the fourth phase focuses on scaling and ensuring long-term sustainability. After successful pilots, the model can be expanded to include more ECE centers, with universities establishing dedicated centers for collaboration and sustainability to manage and institutionalize the partnership. These collaborations can also be embedded into university curriculums, with ECE-focused case studies and projects incorporated into management courses, creating a continuous pipeline of student interns and research projects. To secure long-term sustainability, the steering committee can work with policymakers to develop supportive policies, such as funding incentives, tax benefits for ECE institutions, and grants for innovative projects.

For example, a university might establish a dedicated partnership office that coordinates student placements, faculty involvement, and resource sharing with ECE centers. Marketing students could design promotional campaigns for ECE institutions, finance students could develop cash flow management tools, and faculty members would mentor both students and ECE managers to ensure effective implementation. This phased, practical approach transforms theoretical collaboration into actionable steps, fostering a sustainable and impactful partnership between universities and ECE institutions.

4. CONCLUSION

This study addresses a critical gap in the research on university-ECE partnerships by presenting a collaborative business model to tackle key challenges faced by ECE institutions, including financial constraints, inadequate managerial support, and ineffective marketing strategies. By leveraging universities as strategic partners, ECE institutions can access expertise in financial planning, management training, and marketing, fostering greater operational sustainability. The findings highlight the mutual benefits of such partnerships, as they not only strengthen ECE institutions but also align with universities' objectives of community engagement and academic contribution. This collaborative model carries significant implications for educational policy and community development, offering a pathway for lasting impact across both sectors. To advance this approach, ECE administrators are encouraged to pursue resource-sharing and joint training initiatives with universities, while universities should design dedicated programs to support local ECEs through training, consultation, and research. Policymakers can further bolster these efforts by introducing funding initiatives and tax incentives to encourage cross-sector collaboration.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its small sample size of 15 participants and its focus on the Indonesian educational landscape, which restricts the generalizability of findings to other contexts. Future research should incorporate larger, more diverse samples and consider mixed-method

approaches to validate the proposed model's impact and applicability across varying cultural and policy settings. Nevertheless, this study offers a robust foundation for fostering sustainable partnerships between universities and ECE institutions, contributing to improved educational quality and societal well-being.

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