

Building school and community collaboration in realizing competitive vocational high school graduates

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Abstract: Enhancing the competitiveness of vocational school graduates requires strong collaboration between schools and society as an integrated educational ecosystem. This collaboration extends beyond partnerships with businesses and industries to include the active involvement of parents, institutions, and local communities in supporting student development. The school's public relations function plays a strategic role in fostering communication and cooperation between schools and their stakeholders. This study aims to analyze the role of public relations in fostering collaboration between schools and communities to produce competitive vocational graduates. It also identifies internal and external challenges and the strategies developed to address them. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design at one of the SMK Mutu in Malang, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. These data were then processed using NVivo 14 for coding and thematic identification. The results reveal that public relations serves as a central coordinator for cross-sector collaboration and as an adaptive agent, employing problem-solving and collaborative strategies to address school challenges. These findings underscore that public relations acts as a key mediator, ensuring the effective and sustainable operation of school-community partnerships to enhance the quality and competitiveness of vocational education.

Keywords: Collaboration, competitive graduates, public relations, school community

Abstrak: Peningkatan daya saing lulusan sekolah kejuruan memerlukan kolaborasi yang kuat antara sekolah dan masyarakat sebagai ekosistem pendidikan yang terintegrasi. Kolaborasi ini meluas melampaui kemitraan dengan dunia usaha dan industri, mencakup keterlibatan aktif orang tua, lembaga, dan masyarakat sekitar dalam mendukung perkembangan siswa. Fungsi hubungan masyarakat sekolah memainkan peran strategis dalam membina komunikasi dan kerja sama antara sekolah dan para pemangku kepentingannya. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran hubungan masyarakat dalam mendorong kolaborasi antara sekolah dan masyarakat untuk menghasilkan lulusan sekolah kejuruan yang berdaya saing. Ini juga mengidentifikasi tantangan internal dan eksternal serta strategi yang dikembangkan untuk mengatasinya. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus di salah satu SMK Mutu di Malang, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan analisis dokumen. Data ini kemudian diproses menggunakan NVivo 14 untuk pengkodean dan identifikasi tematik. Hasilnya mengungkapkan bahwa hubungan masyarakat berfungsi sebagai pusat koordinator untuk kolaborasi lintas sektor dan sebagai agen adaptif, menggunakan strategi pemecahan masalah dan kolaboratif untuk mengatasi tantangan sekolah. Temuan ini menggarisbawahi bahwa hubungan masyarakat berperan sebagai mediator utama, memastikan kelancaran dan keberlanjutan kemitraan sekolah-masyarakat untuk meningkatkan kualitas dan daya saing pendidikan kejuruan.

Kata kunci: Kolaborasi, lulusan yang kompetitif, hubungan masyarakat, komunitas sekolah

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INTRODUCTION

Vocational high schools (SMK) are vocational education institutions that prepare their graduates to enter the workforce immediately with all the skills they have learned in school (Ridwan et al., 2025; Spöttl & Windelband, 2020). However, improving practical skills and

theoretical understanding can prepare vocational education graduates to enter the workforce directly (Liu et al., 2023). In preparing for this, vocational schools also need support from the community (Nouwen & Clycq, 2019), particularly in the business, commercial, and industrial sectors, to ensure the educational process remains relevant, adaptive, and competitive. As emphasized by the research findings of Nykänen et al. (2022), collaboration between vocational schools and the workplace presents opportunities, and it is also confirmed that sharing experiences and learning together can enrich the learning context. The implementation of collaboration enables the creation of a more contextually relevant learning environment aligned with the demands of the job market, ultimately strengthening the competitiveness of vocational education graduates.

Collaboration between schools and the community in education is increasingly needed to adapt to social and workplace changes (Garrison et al., 2024; Muharam et al., 2025). Collaboration among policymakers, educators, and parents is essential to foster an environment that encourages community support and participation, ultimately improving educational outcomes (Legede et al., 2024; Timan et al., 2024). In this context, Riley (2008) stated that cooperation between schools and communities must be reciprocal and meaningful, so that the relationship between schools and communities should not be merely formal or administrative (Wheeler et al., 2018), but should develop into a strategic partnership focused on improving the quality of educational output so that it can foster community trust for broader involvement, which ultimately contributes to a positive perception that reflects the educational institution's openness to accepting and inviting various parties (Norman et al., 2023; Nuzula et al., 2024). Several of these theories lead to the understanding that collaboration between schools and communities must be managed as an evolving relationship, based on trust, mutual benefit, and a focus on improving educational outcomes.

The growth of this trust becomes a valuable social capital to encourage broader participation from various parties, including the business sector, industry, government agencies, and the local community. Partnerships are built as an effort to achieve institutional success (Supriyanto et al., 2024). Through targeted cooperation, each party involved can support each other in achieving common goals, strengthening institutional capacity, and increasing the effectiveness of education program implementation. Certainly, to build partnerships, good communication between the school, the community, and the surrounding environment is necessary (Indriani et al., 2018; Maisyaroh et al., 2021; Sumarsono et al., 2016). In other words, this communication creates understanding, aligns needs, and prevents perception gaps between stakeholders.

Furthermore, community support plays a crucial role in the success of vocational school education (Björk-Åman & Ström, 2022; Bouw et al., 2021; Dagar, 2022; Garrison et al., 2024). Collaboration between SMK and the community, especially the world of work, is a crucial foundation for enhancing the relevance of vocational education. Moreover, these results show that active participation from the community and external stakeholders greatly influences the success of vocational education (Hiim, 2022). However, most studies still focus on the aspect of school cooperation with the industrial world (Arifin et al., 2022; Fitrianti et al., 2025; Habibi & Hapsari, 2021; Munthe & Mataputun, 2021; Ubaidah et al., 2021; Yahya & Maydatulla, 2023; Yoto et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the forms of social and collaborative cooperation between schools and the wider community have not been

explored much. In fact, the community can participate fully in every stage of education implementation in schools (Kusumaningrum et al., 2017). In other words, improving graduate competitiveness requires synergy between schools, the business and industry world, and society as a mutually reinforcing educational ecosystem. This collaboration is an important step in preparing highly competitive vocational school graduates.

Hands (2023) explained that the community can come from various sectors, such as parents, the surrounding community, organizations, government institutions, private institutions, and industry partners. Through collaboration, schools can obtain various forms of support, whether in the form of resources, innovative ideas, or social networks that play an important role in strengthening the learning process, shaping the character of students, and improving the quality of graduates (Mustofa et al., 2024; Nurlaiva & Sumarsono, 2018; Syari et al., 2018). Collaboration among various components of society enables the formation of a more impactful and sustainable education ecosystem to produce competent, competitive graduates.

Therefore, the relationship between schools and the community should focus on awareness and reciprocity, as procedural relationships often lead to temporary participation (Hayuana et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2020; Magnussen & Hod, 2023; Ngoben, 2022). In other words, relationships that are carried out only formally, such as routine meetings or administrative activities, usually do not lead to long-lasting community involvement. However, when there is mutual trust, the community will feel a sense of ownership of the school, resulting in more sincere, consistent, and sustainable participation. Thus, the relationship between schools and the community needs to be managed through hard work in strategy development and organization (Muharam, et al., 2025; Prabandari et al., 2021).

One important element in building such collaboration is the role of public relations. According to Firmansyah et al. (2024), public relations has transformed to play a more profound role in facilitating communication between schools and the community as well as increasing understanding of school objectives. Furthermore, public relations also encourages community support and participation in collaborative efforts to improve the quality of education (Sumarsono et al., 2019). This transformation directly supports the strengthening of the school's social relations with the surrounding community. It creates opportunities for cooperation with various business and industry partners as strategic partners of the school, particularly for vocational schools that focus on graduate output, to develop graduates who are competitive and enhance the institution's reputation (Afriani & Timan, 2024).

Based on several previous studies, it has been identified that the success of vocational schools in producing graduates who are competitive in the world of work can be influenced by the school's ability to build its image, maintain relationships, and manage sustainable cooperation with various external parties, especially the role of the school's public relations. Although previous studies have not explored in depth the strategic efforts of public relations in building school collaboration with other elements of society to produce competitive graduates, the novelty of this study lies in the efforts of public relations, which uses its skills as the main driver in building school and community collaboration to prepare competitive graduates. This research is important because public relations' ability to manage relationships is essential for strengthening public trust and expanding partnership

networks. The main objective of this study is to explore and analyze the role of school public relations in fostering collaboration between schools and the community to produce competitive vocational school graduates. This study also aims to identify the internal and external challenges public relations faces in managing collaboration, as well as the strategies developed to overcome them.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design, chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the transformation of public relations roles in building strategic collaborations within Vocational High Schools (SMK). Case studies offer researchers the opportunity to examine a case or phenomenon in depth while maintaining a comprehensive perspective that aligns with real-world conditions (Yin, 2014). The research location was determined to be one of the SMK Mutu in Malang, which is known for its extensive network of collaborations with both the industrial world and the community. The research was conducted from May 2025 to September 2025. The research subjects consisted of one key informant and five supporting informants who were directly related to public relations functions at the school. Sample selection is done intentionally (*purposefully sampled*) to choose participants, locations, documents, or even visual materials that are considered most capable of helping the researcher understand the problem and answer the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Details of the research subjects can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview guidelines

Research Subject	Code	Topics of Questions
Principal of Vocational High School	KAS	1. The role of public relations
Deputy Principal for Public Relations (Key Informant)	WKH	2. Forms of collaboration undertaken by schools
Head of School Organization	KBO	3. Stakeholder involvement
Head of the Special Job Exchange	KBK	4. Public relations efforts to build stakeholder trust
Student	SIS	5. Challenges and strategies for establishing collaboration
Parents of students	OTS	

The instruments used in data collection were: (1) in-depth interviews with research subjects; (2) participant observation by directly visiting the research site; and (3) document study by analyzing public relations activities. We strived to ensure the reliability of the data obtained by triangulating data sources and techniques and conducting member checks. As for the data analysis techniques used in this study, we followed the steps recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2023), combined with a priori coding and inductive analysis approaches developed by (Bingham, 2023), as shown in Figure 1. This model was chosen for its ability to provide a coherent, in-depth analysis, enabling researchers to build a comprehensive understanding of data from interviews, observations, and documentation. We described the data analysis technique used in seven step-by-step stages from bottom (specific) to top (general). First, we managed and prepared the data, classified all findings, and organized them according to the data sources. Second, we reviewed all the data to gain

a comprehensive understanding of the information. Third, we coded the data by grouping parts of the data into categories using NVivo 14 *software*. Fourth, from these codes, we identified the main themes supported by informant quotes. Fifth, we connected the themes and compile them into a narrative that describes the phenomenon. Sixth, we deepen the analysis using a case study framework and NVivo visualizations, such as Project Map. Finally, we presented their final interpretation in the form of a qualitative narrative reinforced with visualizations of the findings.

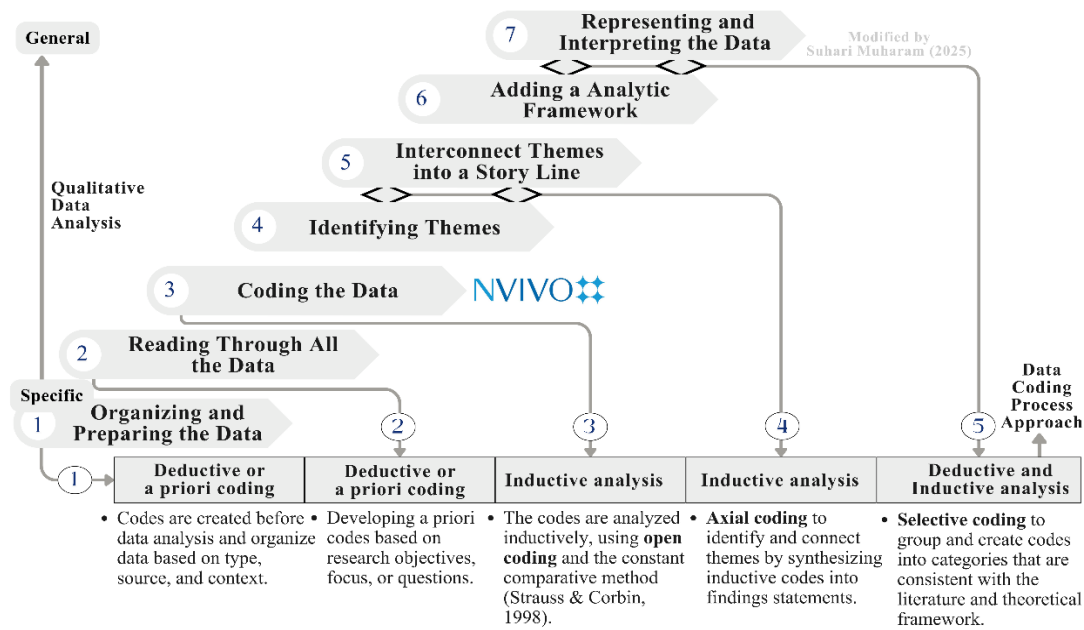


Fig. 1. Stages of qualitative data analysis (Processed by the researcher)

After the coding process was complete, We then interpreted the data to explore deeper meanings. This stage allowed for the emergence of new information that was relevant and provided real benefits for the continuity of the research (Muharam & Sobri, 2025). However, it should be emphasized that NVivo functions only as a supporting tool in the process of processing and analyzing qualitative data. This means that although this software helps simplify technical work, such as data grouping and visualization, the primary responsibility still lies with the researcher. Researchers must still manually input data, organize the analysis process, and interpret the results to suit the research context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of data analysis conducted using NVivo 14 software, which the researcher then visualized through Project Map, this is the final stage of analysis in the research data processing process. According to Mortelmans (2024), a project map is a tool that can be used to visualize the relationships between elements of ideas systematically. This study identified several key findings that reflect the role of public relations at one of SMK Mutu in Malang in fostering collaboration between schools and the community to produce competitive vocational school graduates. Referring to the interview results, the Deputy Head of Public Relations stated that:

“So, external stakeholders of SMK Mutu include individuals and institutions. These institutions can be divided into private and government institutions, as well as internal Muhammadiyah institutions, which are stakeholders in SMK Mutu. Therefore, if the stakeholders are in government institutions, they include the education office, the Ministry of Education, the Directorate of Vocational Education, or State higher education institutions. If they are non-governmental institutions, they include institutions that are part of our interests. Therefore, in this case, the Public Relations Department establishes relationships with all parties, especially the police, the military, and other relevant parties.” (Interview with WKH on May 23, 2025).

According to the interview results, it indicates that the role of public relations is highly strategic in facilitating relationships with all parties, including the government and the community. Public Relations ensures communication and coordination run smoothly and connects schools’ needs with potential support from stakeholders. These findings were also confirmed by interviews with school principals, who stated:

“When it comes to communication with the community, especially with industry, it is usually the Public Relations department that plays a major role. They are always active in maintaining relationships, staying close, establishing contacts, and ensuring smooth communication.” (Interview with KAS on May 23, 2025)

Based on the interview results, the public relations not only serves as an information disseminator but also acts as a strategic mediator, coordinating the school’s interests with the needs and opportunities of various stakeholders. With this role, the Public Relations Officer becomes an important element in building collaboration between the school and the community, which ultimately supports the quality of competitive graduates. On the one hand, public relations also faces internal and external challenges. These challenges were explained by the deputy head of public relations in an interview, stating that:

“Internal and external challenges are inevitable. Internal challenges require team support, because public relations cannot work alone. External challenges are that today we see a phenomenon where schools are growing well with technology and they also have innovations, and we also have innovations. They are competing, which is part of the external challenges that we cannot control.” (Interview with WKH on May 30, 2025)

The statement made by the Deputy Head of Public Relations shows that in carrying out its function as a mediator for collaboration between schools and the community, public relations faces two main challenges, namely internal and external challenges, which are unavoidable. Thus, these findings confirm that the role of public relations is no longer limited to administrative functions or merely a means of communication, but has developed into a strategic actor in building collaboration with the community and the industrial world. In other words, these findings show a close connection between public relations’ ability to build networks with stakeholders. On the one hand, public relations also faces internal and

external challenges. However, these challenges have given rise to strategies to overcome them. The results of these significant findings are shown in Figure 2.

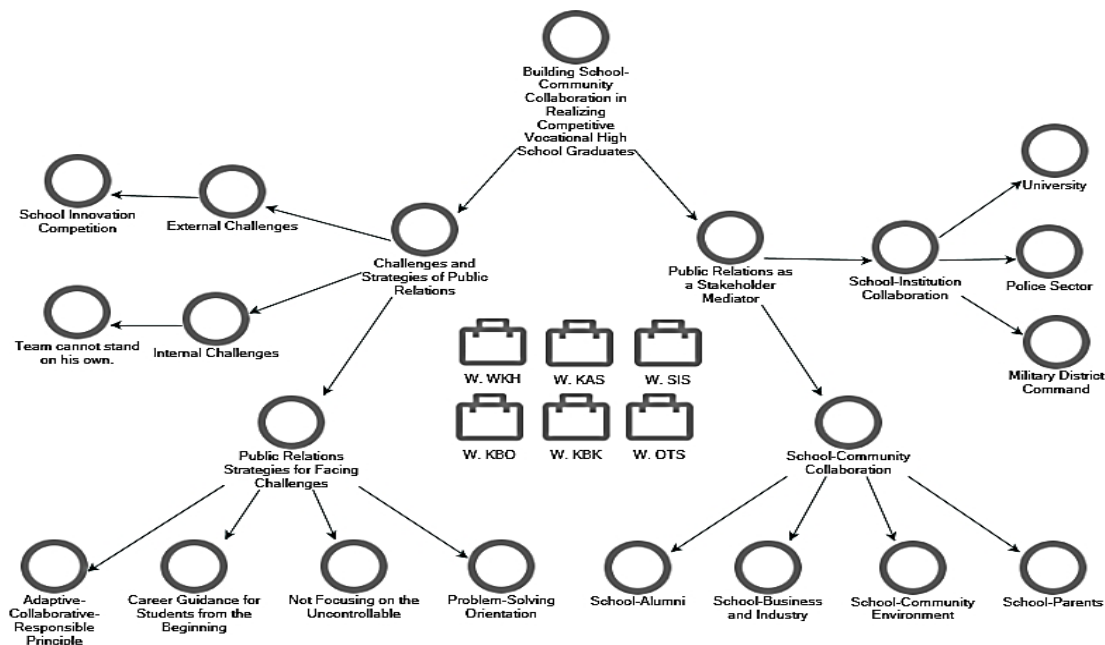


Fig. 2. Visualization of the project map of research findings

Based on the results of qualitative data analysis, visualized through the NVivo *project map* in Figure 2, it was evident that the findings of this study focus on SMK Mutu efforts to foster collaboration between schools and the community in producing competitive graduates. This collaboration involves the community in a broad sense, including parents, alumni, the school's surrounding environment, the business and industrial world, universities, and government agencies. The structure of the findings on building school and community collaboration, which forms the main discussion, is as follows: (1) the presence of the public relations role as a stakeholder mediator, which bridges the school with various elements of the community, and (2) the challenges and strategies of public relations in building school collaboration. Thus, the findings of this study can be further elaborated upon by the researcher in a research discussion, providing in-depth analysis of each aspect that emphasizes efforts to build school and community collaboration in vocational schools.

Public relations as a mediator in building collaboration between schools and communities

Currently, public relations has developed into a strategic actor, mediating communication and initiating cooperation between schools and various parties from both internal and external environments. As found in Kurniawan (2023) research, public relations in schools plays an important role as a communication bridge and facilitator in building partnerships between schools and the community, making this role key to realizing high-quality and competitive schools. This confirms that the success of schools in achieving excellence greatly depends on how effectively and sustainably public relations manages communication and relationships with the community. Furthermore, public relations plays a role in managing and conveying information related to various aspects, ranging from

educational programs, school activities, policies, to student achievements and other special agendas to stakeholders, thereby contributing to strengthening the bond between the school and the surrounding community (Marpaung et al., 2023; Mulyadi, 2018;). In other words, public relations becomes the center of coordination that ensures the connection between the interests of all parties in the education ecosystem because, after all, the relationship between vocational high schools and the community needs to be strategically designed to foster a positive perception of the existence of vocational high schools, both in the eyes of the wider community, parents, and the business and industrial circles. This positive image will later become a driving factor that increases public interest and attraction to choose vocational schools as a level of further education (Nulchakim et al., 2024).

This study presents the findings of a qualitative analysis conducted utilizing NVivo 14 software, a tool widely used in qualitative research to organize data, classify categories, and map patterns of findings. Through these visualizations, the researchers demonstrated the dynamic role of school public relations, which has evolved from a purely administrative function to a strategic role in initiating and managing collaborations with various stakeholders. The researchers present the visualization results in Figure 3.

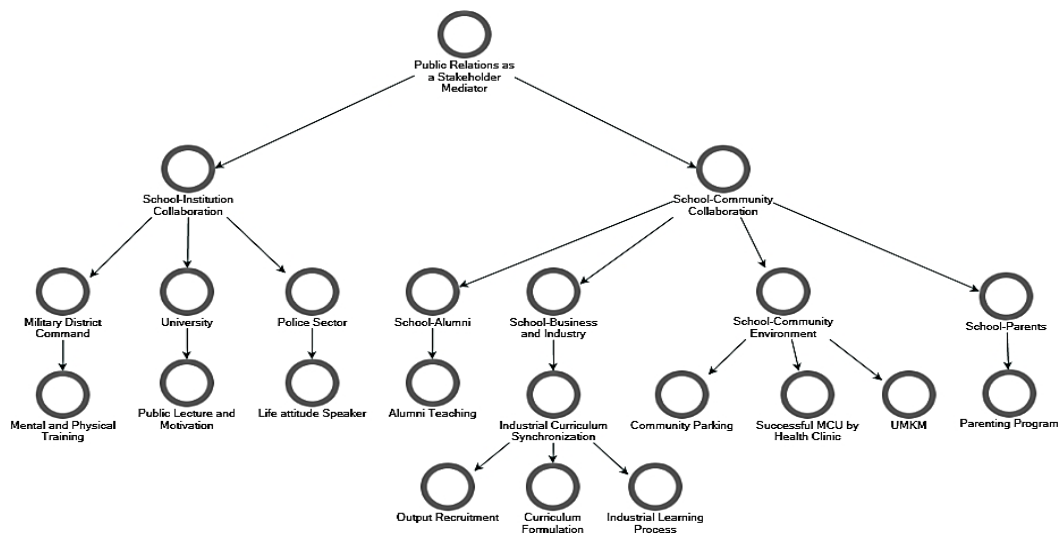


Fig. 3. Results of public relations as a mediator of stakeholder collaboration

The data analysis results, visualized on the project map, indicate that the public relations officer is at the central point and serves as the main connector in the collaboration network. From this central role, various multi-directional relationships can be seen, including cooperation with agencies such as the Koramil and Polsek. Collaboration with the community is realized within it, such as the involvement of parents through parenting programs, collaboration with the industrial world, which is realized in curriculum synchronization and recruitment output, as well as the contribution of the surrounding community in the aspects of health and the development of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).

School collaboration with the koramil and police institutions

This collaboration reflects that one of the SMK Mutu in Malang places character stability, discipline, and security as important elements in strengthening the competencies

of its students and graduates. The involvement of these two institutions is not merely ceremonial; they also go into the field through real coaching programs for students. For example, the Koramil plays a role in training students' physical discipline through coaching activities that emphasize endurance, responsibility, and discipline. Meanwhile, the police station contributed by providing socialization on safety and the dangers of drug abuse, so that students gained a practical understanding of the importance of maintaining order and avoiding behaviors that are harmful to themselves. As Rachmawati et al.'s (2018) research on cadetship in character development shows, the principle is not to fully implement a military model but to adopt the fundamentals commonly applied in the military world. This approach aims to instil character values, especially discipline, while also shaping students' personalities so they develop good and responsible attitudes.

School collaboration with industry

In the context of vocational schools, collaboration with industry is a necessity that cannot be ignored. This is important to ensure that the learning process in vocational schools remains aligned with the industry's needs, demands, and competency standards. The urgency of this collaboration is also reinforced by the views of Arifin et al. (2022), who emphasize that vocational schools must collaborate with industry to keep pace with the rapid technological developments in the modern industrial era. The goals of the partnership between vocational schools and the business and industrial world are essentially the same: to improve the quality of education according to market needs, to align the curriculum and school programs, and to expand opportunities for graduates' absorption and placement in the workforce (Setiawan et al., 2024). Industry involvement at SMK Mutu is realized through several forms of collaboration, including: (a) an industry teaching program at the school that brings industry practitioners directly into the learning process. This provides students with practical insights as well as a contextual understanding of the dynamics of the world of work, which is not always obtained solely from theoretical results (Faizal et al., 2018; Wibowo, 2016; (b) joint curriculum formulation aligns the school curriculum with industry competency standards, ensuring that the skills possessed are more relevant to the real needs of the business and industrial world (Agustian et al., 2024); (c) the curriculum synchronization process serves to ensure that the skills taught, both hard and soft skills, are truly in line with developments and the demands of reality in the business and industrial world. Curriculum synchronization plays an important role in ensuring effective industry involvement. Active participation from companies makes a significant contribution to creating a conducive educational environment, which in turn can support the success of vocational schools (Pramono et al., 2023; Yoto et al., 2024); and (d) this collaboration is directed toward recruitment output, where graduates are equipped with competencies by industry, and also toward job opportunities through recruitment mechanisms facilitated by industry partners. Thus, this involvement can help students acquire work skills that form an important foundation for enhancing their competencies, aligning with the demands of the workforce and the needs of the labour market (Astuti et al., 2023; Yuanita et al., 2020).

School collaboration with motivators

At one of the SMK Mutu in Malang, the school actively brings in external motivators from practitioners, universities, successful alums, and professionals in various fields to

support students' motivation so they are ready to enter the world of work. This aims to help students develop a work mindset and prepare for the challenges of the working world. Increased work motivation in students has a positive impact on their readiness to face the working world. This means that the higher the work motivation they possess, the greater their readiness to enter and adapt to job demands (Kurniawan, 2023).

School collaboration with parents

This form of collaboration is characterized by the existence of a student evaluation report program at the end of each semester or grade promotion, which is not just a report card distribution agenda, but is packaged in the form of parenting activities. The school presents the results of student development evaluations and guides parents on supporting their children, both academically and mentally, to face the challenges of the working world. This result aligns with Epstein (2011) research on the School-Family-Community Partnership model, which emphasizes that parental involvement in formal educational activities can increase students' learning motivation and attachment to school. Thus, this collaboration can build an effective communication bridge between schools and families, ultimately motivating students to be ready for the world of work and improving the quality of graduates by involving parents in every process.

School collaboration with the surrounding community

This collaboration is realized through cooperation with health clinics for student medical check-ups and building relationships with local MSMEs as a platform for developing entrepreneurial skills. The health clinic aims to provide health check-up programs and health education. Meanwhile, collaborating with local MSMEs, such as a small local bakery that recruits students to work in their outlets, is also a goal. The relationship between the school and the community allows the school to identify the diverse potential and resources possessed by the community. These resources can then be optimally utilized to support the improvement of education quality and the development of students in schools (Kurniawan, 2023).

Thus, the visualization results show that public relations is a key actor that regulates the rhythm of interaction and maintains the continuity of partnerships among stakeholders in the vocational education environment. Through the established collaboration, schools gain access to various forms of support, including materials, personnel, and a conducive social environment. This provides an opportunity for schools to involve community strengths in educational programs, creating synergy in advancing the quality of vocational education.

Collaboration between schools and the community is crucial for improving the quality of education and producing competent, outstanding, and highly competitive graduates, particularly at the vocational high school level (Agustian et al., 2024). Schools no longer stand as independent entities; instead, they need to build openness and synergy with various parties in their social environment (Prihatin et al., 2019; Syari et al., 2018). Through collaboration, schools can gain various forms of support, including resources, innovative ideas, and social networks, which play an important role in strengthening the learning process, developing students' character, and improving the quality of graduates (Nurlaiva & Sumarsono, 2018; Syari et al., 2018). In other words, schools cannot function as stand-

alone institutions. Collaboration built with the social environment enables schools to strengthen their internal capacity.

Meanwhile, the collaboration patterns implemented in the school environment indicate that public relations plays a central role as a mediator in bridging relationships between stakeholders. This makes public relations a strategic hub capable of integrating the interests of the school with the business and industrial world, the surrounding community, parents, alums, and government agencies. Therefore, it is important to understand how various parties are collaborating to optimize the production of competitive vocational high school graduates. The collaboration between the two parties is seen as a strategic approach capable of driving the achievement of higher-quality educational goals (Nugraha et al., 2025).

Public relations strategies for overcoming challenges in school and community collaboration

Behind the implementation of public relations in an educational institution, the process does not always run smoothly because it often faces various challenges and obstacles, both internal and external (Marpaung et al., 2023; Prabandari et al., 2021; Putri et al., 2025). In the findings of this research, one of the SMK Mutu in Malang successfully has positioned the public relations role as a strategic coordination centre in facing the challenges encountered. Through adaptive and collaborative strategies, public relations plays an important role in maintaining the school's reputation (Sumendap, 2021), building relationships across stakeholders (Putri et al., 2025), and creating innovations that support the sustainability of partnerships (Marpaung et al., 2023).

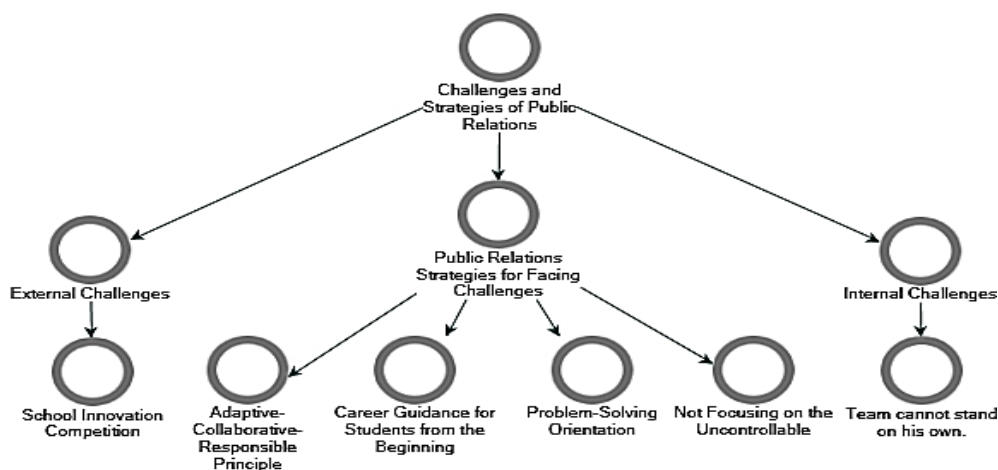


Fig. 4. Results of public relations challenges and strategies

The results of the data analysis, visualised through a project map in Figure 4, depict a thematic map centred on "Public Relations Challenges and Strategies." The challenges faced include both internal (the team cannot stand alone) and external (competition between schools) aspects. Meanwhile, in the strategy section, several main subthemes emerged, such as a focus on problem-solving, early career development, the adaptive-collaborative-responsible principle, and not focusing on uncontrollable things. Challenges faced by public relations in building collaboration

Public relations challenges are divided into two dimensions: internal and external challenges. One of the main internal challenges identified from the analysis results is that the public relations team lacks autonomy. Public relations should not work individually because the success of school collaboration heavily relies on support from other departments. As Marpaung et al. (2023) explained, an organisation cannot guarantee the success of its programs if it operates in isolation; therefore, solid cooperation with various parties is needed to achieve common goals. This means that public relations at SMK Mutu Malang is closely related to inter-team coordination, indicating that its role cannot function independently without synergy and support from other units within the school. This is because every success in carrying out public relations functions results from cross-departmental collaboration, where communication, information, and individual roles are interconnected to achieve common goals.

Besides internal issues, public relations also faces external challenges rooted in the ever-growing competition among vocational education institutions in terms of innovation, technology, and school reputation. External challenges arise not only from competition with other schools offering similar flagship programs but also from the changing public perception of the positive image of educational institutions. As explained by Zahro and Diana (2025), educational institutions need to build a positive image in the eyes of the community, as this good image will ultimately influence the community's decision in choosing schools for their children. The external challenges faced by public relations at SMK Mutu Malang are not just about competing in terms of flagship programs, as the school already has many flagship programs. The most important challenge is how to build public trust in the school's reputation for excellence. After all, public relations must continuously strengthen a positive image through communication strategies, consistent digital publications, and cross-sectoral cooperation networks to face competitive pressure from outside the institution. Therefore, institutional image management must be carried out in a planned and sustainable manner through good relationships with the community (Sumendap, 2021). This positive image should be an important asset for the school in expanding its network of cooperation, attracting prospective students, and strengthening its position amidst competition among educational institutions.

It is clear that internal challenges highlight the urgency of improving coordination and collaboration between departments within the school, enabling public relations to perform its role optimally. Meanwhile, external challenges require public relations to adapt to the dynamics of competition and innovation between schools. Thus, the synergy between internal strengthening and external adaptation is key for public relations to maintain the existence and competitiveness of educational institutions.

Strategies implemented by public relations in building collaboration

The public relations strategy at SMK Mutu Malang in overcoming challenges is realized in four main points: (1) problem-solving orientation, with an emphasis on finding solutions, not just focusing on the issues faced; (2) not focusing on uncontrollable factors, by allocating energy and resources to aspects that are realistic to manage, without being overly burdened by things outside of personal control; (3) career guidance from the beginning, this mentoring is provided from the students' early years, so that the process of introducing the world of work and mental readiness can be formed more maturely from the

beginning of their studies; and (4) the strategies underlying public relations work are adaptive, collaborative, and responsible. The value of adaptability allows public relations to adjust to changes in both technological development and industry needs. The value of collaboration ensures harmonious cooperation between internal school parties and external partners. The value of responsibility forms the basis for public relations professional ethics, maintaining public trust and ensuring that every step taken is oriented toward the institution's progress.

In terms of problem-solving orientation, focusing on uncontrollable factors is a strategy for addressing internal challenges. Indeed, public relations officers strive to respond to issues directly by seeking concrete solutions when faced with challenges. As shown in the research by Lina et al. (2025), we continually seek solutions to enable teachers and educational staff to play a more effective, optimal role in implementing public relations programs in schools. The strategy regarding uncontrollable factors indicates that public relations recognizes factors beyond the school's control, such as competitors' innovation or external dynamics that the institution cannot regulate. By focusing on what can be controlled, public relations strives to manage energy and resources more effectively, avoiding reactive or counterproductive responses.

In the context of one of the SMK Mutu in Malang, this strategy is evident in the public relations department's ability to identify internal communication barriers and develop data-driven solutions based on field observations. Conversely, they also focused on things that could be directly managed, such as optimizing internal team performance, strengthening communication with teachers and principals, and ensuring consistent publications through the school's social media. Therefore, adopting a problem-solving orientation and managing uncontrollable factors are important strategies for the success of public relations in facing internal challenges.

Meanwhile, strategies for early career development for students, along with adaptive, collaborative, and responsible values, are built to address external challenges. Early career development reflects the public relations department's efforts to synergize public relations programs with the planned management of students' careers. This includes the ability to obtain relevant information, recognize one's interests and potential, and relate them to existing job opportunities. This process helps individuals identify fields or types of work that align with their interests and abilities (Mutmainah et al., 2020). Since entering the early grades, students are guided to develop a mindset aligned with the needs of the industrial world through various activities, such as career orientation, skills training, and visits or direct interaction with businesses and industries.

On the other hand, adaptive attitude reflects the public relations department's ability to adjust to external changes and challenges. Meanwhile, the collaborative nature emphasizes the importance of cross-disciplinary cooperation within the school environment and with partner organizations. The principle of responsibility emphasizes the performance aspect of the public relations role, ensuring that all communication and collaboration processes are conducted professionally.

The four public relations strategies for facing internal and external challenges illustrate a planned, directed, and results-oriented work system. Internal challenges, such as a lack of interdepartmental coordination and dependence on a single work unit, can be overcome by implementing problem-solving-oriented strategies and focusing on

controllable factors. Meanwhile, in response to external pressure from competition between educational institutions, public relations demonstrates an adaptive attitude by providing career guidance to students from an early age, grounded in adaptive, collaborative, and professional responsibility values. Through a problem-solving approach, public relations focuses on concrete solutions and collaborative opportunities, rather than on uncontrollable obstacles.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and analysis presented, it is evident that producing competitive vocational school graduates requires synergy between schools, the business and industrial world, and society as an educational ecosystem that mutually reinforces each other. This collaboration is an important step in preparing highly competitive vocational school graduates who can adapt to the ever-evolving dynamics of the world's workforce needs, both nationally and internationally. On the other hand, public relations, acting as an active mediator bridging the relationship between the school and various stakeholders such as industry, government agencies, community organizations, parents, and local business units, has proven to be a collaborative driver ensuring that all parties are well-involved in the educational process at SMK Mutu Malang. This role is realized through communication and is based on trust, creating a mutually beneficial partnership between schools, industry, the community, and other partner institutions. Through the established collaborative pattern, public relations can strengthen the school's position as an educational institution that adapts to the needs of the world of work and society.

Meanwhile, in the face of various internal and external challenges, public relations emphasizes a problem-solving orientation and a focus on controllable factors as a strategy to maintain organizational resilience. In addition, public relations implements early career development programs and instils values of adaptability, collaboration, and professional responsibility to strengthen the school's reputation and ensure the sustainability of external partnerships. Thus, the public relations strategy implemented serves two purposes: maintaining the organization's stability and resilience through effective internal management, and expanding sustainable external collaboration with the industrial world and society. The application of the principles of adaptability, collaboration, and responsibility makes public relations a key pillar in building a positive image and the sustainability of strategic partnerships between schools and their stakeholders.

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