The Leadership Role of the Principal in Improving the Competitiveness of Madrasah Tsanawiyah Nahdlatul Muslimat Surakarta

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Keywords: Competitiveness; Principal; Leadership *Article history:* Received 2024-11-25 Revised 2025-01-26 Accepted 2025-04-11	This study aims to analyze the role of the principal's leadership style in enhancing the competitiveness of Madrasah Tsanawiyah Nahdlatul Muslimat (MTs NDM) Surakarta. The leadership style applied by each school principal is different. The research subject is the principal of MTs NDM Surakarta. MTs NDM, which also functions as an Islamic boarding school, offers a unique appeal compared to other madrasahs, as it requires students to reside in dormitories. The leadership style adopted by the principal is collegial-collective, which contributes to the continuous progress of the school. Key strategies implemented include optimizing facility and infrastructure management, improving the quality of educational processes through innovation by adopting strengths from other institutions, enhancing teacher competencies through webinars, integrating general, religious, and tahfidz subjects, and engaging parents and the community. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method to examine the principal's efforts in increasing the school's competitiveness. Data were collected through interviews and direct observations to obtain a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the leadership approach, strategies employed, and challenges faced.

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership comes from the word "leadership" which is rooted in the word "leader." A leader is a person who leads, while leadership refers to the position they hold. Etymologically, the term leadership comes from the word "lead," which means to guide or direct. From the word "lead" comes the verb "to lead," which means to guide and direct. Linguistically, leadership contains the meaning of a person's strength or quality in leading and directing what they lead to achieve goals (Mukti, 2018).

Leadership has broad dimensions, but in the context of education, effective leadership greatly determines the quality of an institution. Leadership includes efforts to influence others, not just to fulfill the wishes of superiors, but also to achieve organizational goals or objectives. When understood more deeply, the role of leaders and leadership is crucial for the continuity of a group or organization (Syahril, 2019). For example, when conflicts or disputes occur among group members, organizational leaders have the task of finding alternative solutions that can result in agreements and rules that can be followed together. Education also has a very important role in human life on this earth.

Important aspects of leadership are that leadership is basically related to human resources, only exists in organized groups, and functions as an advantage or potential (Rostiawati, 2020). Management includes leadership, which is part of management processes and functions. Leadership means focusing on influencing others to take certain actions to achieve goals (Nurmiyanti, L., & Candra, 2019). In this context, the school principal as an educational leader has strategic responsibilities in maintaining and improving school quality. The Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (KEMENDIKBUDRISTEK) Number 40 of 2021 states that school leaders are teachers who are given authority in directing the teaching and learning process and maintaining educational units, which include kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, high school, and vocational school (Muspawi, 2020).

According to Wahjosumidja in (Febrianty, F., Arifudin, O., Naibaho, L., Palindih, L. I., Nurmiyanti, L., Doho & D. B., ... & Susanto, 2020), the school principal is defined as a functional teacher who is given the authority and task to lead a school, which is the place where the learning process takes place. The school principal plays an important role in the learning process to improve school quality. School leaders are expected to maintain all available resources to ensure beneficial teaching and learning stages while saving time and costs. In addition, the school principal strives to develop educational competitiveness through intellectual and non-intellectual activities that support the teaching and learning process. Therefore, it is important to research how the leadership of school principals contributes directly to increasing the competitiveness of educational institutions, especially in madrasas (Syarnubi, 2022). rom leadership styles to tactics implemented in improving competitiveness in schools, the leader of the school provided answers to several questions in the interview forum that the researcher presented on December 24, 2024.

This research was conducted to describe the information and knowledge obtained from a school principal regarding the principal's efforts to improve school competitiveness. Education is a process based on humanism, known as an effort to make humans more human (Pristiwanti, D., Badariah, B., Hidayat, S., & Dewi, 2022). This process is not about belittling someone of lower status, but rather a learning process together between students and teachers. Education is a guidance or direction effort carried out with full awareness by educators to support the physical and mental growth and development of students in order to form superior personalities (Ainissyifa, 2014).

Educational institutions in Indonesia function as a platform to develop the quality of human resources, and have various types (Syarnubi, Martina, & Khodijah, 2019). Islamic education is an effort to enhance human talent through Islamic guidance with the goal of achieving a safe, peaceful, prosperous and happy life. The process of cultural transformation, internalization of Islamic teachings/guidance values, the process of strengthening knowledge, and support for all potential students are included in Islamic education (Asy'arie, B. F., Mun'im, Z., Ma'ruf, R. A., Susanti, S. S., & Kurniawati, 2024).

Islamic education correlates with human behavior. Every process of interaction or discussion between students and their surrounding environment always encompasses both physical and social aspects that are implemented (Miswar Saputra, 2021). In order to achieve the ideal goals of Islamic education, cooperation from all parties is needed. The main goal is to form and create strong Muslim individuals, based on strong faith in religious teachings and obedience to Allah SWT, and consisting of development in terms of etiquette, behavior, social aspects, and education (Cindy, A. H., & Aisyah, n.d.).

In general, the maintenance of education in Indonesia falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. In addition, the Ministry of Religious Affairs also plays a role in managing education, especially in aspects of Islamic education (Millah, N. I. A. I. Q., & Maghfuri, 2019). Currently, formal and non-formal education are still under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Formal education includes RA (Islamic kindergarten), MI (Islamic elementary school), MTs (Islamic junior high school), MA (Islamic senior high school), up to Islamic Religious Higher Education. Meanwhile, non-formal education includes TPA (Quranic learning centers), Majelis Ta'lim (Islamic study groups), Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), and Madrasah Diniyah (religious schools) (Hidayah, 2021). Along with the development of the times, madrasas were born

in the 20th century as part of the renewal of pesantren education and play a significant role in Indonesia's educational ecosystem. Madrasas exist as an alternative to general education that emphasizes the characteristics of Islamic teachings (Chairiyah, 2021). Therefore, it is hoped that madrasas can combine these two advantages, so they can achieve quality standards that are equal to or even higher than public schools.

Madrasas emerged as a response to public dissatisfaction with the pesantren education system that was too centered on teaching religious knowledge. As general educational institutions with distinctive religious characteristics, madrasas were established and expected to successfully develop human resource values in the fields of faith and devotion (IMTAQ) as well as intellectual and technological aspects (IPTEK) (Chairiyah, 2021). However, to compete optimally with other educational institutions, madrasas require innovative leadership strategies that are responsive to global dynamics and student needs. In efforts to address competition between educational institutions, madrasas strive to improve school competitiveness through various aspects, such as curriculum, education quality, facilities and infrastructure, and others. Each educational institution generally has a desire to perform optimally to attract market attention. According to Crown Dirgantoro, the increase in value that companies can create to attract buyers/consumers is called competitiveness. Meanwhile, Agustinus Sri Wahyadi explains that competitive advantage is a condition that creates the potential for a company to earn income that exceeds the average profit earned by competitors in the same industry (Mohamad, R., & Niode, 2020).

Competitiveness in a company refers to the expertise to maintain market position by providing on-time results at affordable prices, flexibly responding to changing needs, and succeeding in product differentiation. This is achieved by developing successful innovation and marketing tactics (Pitoyo, A., & Suhartono, 2018). Competitiveness refers to the ability and performance compared between companies, sub-sectors, or countries in selling and providing goods or services in the market. This concept is usually related to the concept of comparative advantage, namely supporting factors in the production process that allow a country to attract investors to invest in that country compared to other countries. Meanwhile, a school principal is basically an individual like others who is given the responsibility to lead a school as a place for learning activities (Julaiha, 2019).

The researcher conducted observations at the school 4 months before proposing an interview forum with the School Principal to observe the situation and conditions of the school. The information that the researcher obtained in this study can be used to analyze strategic planning to monitor and evaluate the school or SWOT. From this analysis, it can be used as evaluation material and even as a plan to develop the school to become superior to other schools. Thus, this research aims to examine in depth how the leadership of the school principal can be a key factor in increasing the competitiveness of madrasas, especially at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Nahdlatul Muslimat Surakarta. The findings in this study will provide answers to the problem formulation that has been formulated by the researcher.

METHODS

This research is qualitative in nature and was conducted at MTs NDM Surakarta in January 2025. The research involves the school principal as the main subject. The type of research used is a qualitative descriptive case study that aims to describe and deeply understand the principal's strategy in improving school competitiveness. This research uses a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the principal's efforts in increasing competitiveness at MTs NDM Surakarta. According to Sugiyono in (Nasser, A. A., Arifudin, O., Barlian, U. C., & Sauri, 2021), qualitative research method is a research approach used to study objects in natural conditions, where the researcher acts as the main instrument. In qualitative research, there are characteristics of textual analysis, as explained by Creswell as quoted by (Tanjung, R., Cecep, C., Sulaeman, D., Hanafiah, H., & Arifudin, 2019). Qualitative research is a form of interpretive research, where the researcher plays an active role and is directly involved in the ongoing experience with the participants in this research.

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The design of this research emphasizes direct observation and intensive interaction with the school principal and teachers to obtain contextually rich data. The method used in this research is descriptive analytical, with data collection obtained from various sources, backgrounds, and various ways. One of the initial steps in data collection is through literature study. The descriptive method was chosen because it aims to provide a clear, systematic, and in-depth description of the principal's leadership, steps taken to improve school competitiveness, as well as various challenges faced by the principal in efforts to improve competitiveness. This approach allows for in-depth exploration through direct involvement with participants and understanding of the school's socio-cultural context.

The first step taken by the researcher was to meet with the school principal, submit an application letter, and simultaneously obtain permission to conduct research at the school. After that, the researcher held question and answer sessions with the school principal and teachers at MTs NDM Surakarta to obtain information that would be used as analysis material. The researcher aimed to identify and describe the steps taken by the school principal to improve the school's competitiveness. The selection of this location was based on the fact that MTs NDM Surakarta is a school that has a balance between general knowledge and religious knowledge, which distinguishes it from other madrasas.

Data collection techniques were carried out systematically through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted directly on the activities of the school principal and teachers in implementing quality improvement programs. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to provide room for exploration of experiences and strategies applied. Observation is the basis of all scientific knowledge. Scientists can work only based on data, namely facts about reality obtained through observation. The researcher observed how learning support activities at MTs NDM Surakarta were implemented. Interviews were used as a data collection technique if the researcher wanted to conduct a preliminary study to identify problems that needed to be researched, as well as to gain a deeper understanding from the respondents. This data collection technique relies on self-reporting or at the very least on the personal knowledge and beliefs of respondents to gain a deeper understanding. The parties who play an important role in improving school competitiveness, namely the head of MTs NDM Surakarta, became informants in this research, along with teachers who correlate in improving that competitiveness (Sugiyono, 2017).

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, which involve identifying, grouping, and interpreting important themes that emerge from interviews and observations. The analysis steps include data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Testing the credibility or trustworthiness of data in qualitative research is conducted through various methods, such as extending observations and increasing persistence. Source and technique triangulation were used to increase data validity by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation.

This research consists of three main stages, plus a final stage of writing the research results report. The pre-field stage includes preparation of the research plan, location selection, permit arrangement, assessment of field conditions, selection of informants, preparation of equipment, and consideration of research ethics. The fieldwork stage involves understanding the research background, preparation for entering the location, and playing an active role in activities while collecting data. The final stage is data analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Principals who have managerial skills in maintaining the school as an organisation or educational foundation play an important role in developing plans that are in line with the goals agreed upon by all school members. In addition, in improving the organisation or foundation, the principal is expected to have a deep understanding and master all national education policies, by prioritising the principles of efficiency and effectiveness in the development process. Based on this, according to (Arifudin, 2021) the Principal has the responsibility as a manager in maintaining the school to achieve predetermined goals. Madrasahs still face various problems that require attention.

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Firstly, management and leadership are still weak. The administrative situation, principal leadership, performance of teachers, staff, and other aspects are still inadequate. In addition, community participation in madrasahs is still relatively low. One of the reasons parents enrol their children in madrasahs is because they are not accepted in other schools. Efforts are made to catch up, madrasah needs to implement efforts from madrasah custodians, with support from all parties, such as teachers, and school employees together trying to improve madrasah competitiveness.

Madrasah Tsanawiyah Nahdlatul Muslimat Surakarta is located at Jl. Trisula No. 46, Kauman, Kec. Ps. Kliwon, Surakarta City, Central Java. Madrasahs that still need updates like other madrasahs in terms of improving the madrasah. In the 2024/2025 academic year, MTs NDM Surakarta has 475 students. This is an extraordinary achievement for a Private Junior High Education institution located in the village. However, it is also a challenge for MTs NDM to improve its quality so that it becomes one of the competitive and sustainable educational institutions in producing generations that have achievements, have skills, and have high integrity based on spiritual firmness and adherence to religious teachings. At the same time responding to the dynamics and needs of an era that continues to change. Therefore, until now MTs NDM Surakarta continues to make improvements in order to be able to *shallih likulli zamaan wa makaan.*

Principals include teachers who have creativity in maintaining all resources in schools, to be utilised as optimally as possible to achieve common goals (Hasan, 2014). The role of the director of education, the leader of a useful educational institution can show its excellence in increasing the strengths of the school, educators, and students to achieve maximum results. Because of this, principals need to develop school achievement by nurturing schools, teachers, and students efficiently, because these three are important elements in achieving school goals. Maximum school achievement can be an influence in improving school competitiveness. Competitiveness in education is not separate, but rather an interconnected system. Therefore, to assess the quality and competitive strength of a foundation, it must be seen in the context of inputs, processes and outputs.

The principal's efforts in improving school competitiveness: 1). optimising the maintenance of facilities and infrastructure. The principal's efforts at MTs NDM Surakarta are expected to increase the competitiveness of the school by fulfilling the needs of its students. Both learning needs at school and dormitory needs. For the principal, needs and requirements are the main thing. These needs and requirements if fulfilled can affect the teaching and learning process, both educators, students and school employees. All the equipment needed in the teaching and learning stage, both dynamic and static in order to achieve learning objectives run smoothly, structured, useful, save time and resources are called facilities. Facilities are tools or objects that move to support the teaching and learning agenda that is useful (effective) and saves time (efficient) to achieve learning goals. For example, books and computers.

Meanwhile, infrastructure is a tool or object that does not move to support the teaching and learning agenda process which is useful (effective) and saves time (efficient) to achieve learning goals. For example, classrooms and canteens (Sutisna, N. W., & Effane, 2022). Adopting the advantages of other institutions as an effort to improve school competitiveness. The principal also innovates in the process of increasing competitiveness by taking inspiration from the advantages of other institutions and developing an innovative agenda at MTs NDM Surakarta with interesting solutions.

Competitiveness is currently a very crucial thing and an outcome that cannot be ignored. Competitiveness is related to the quality of the school, the more qualified and professional in its management, the higher the competitiveness of the school. To improve the quality of education at MTs NDM Surakarta, the principal designed an innovation programme that adopted the advantages of other institutions, such as Islamic boarding schools. The results of this study are in accordance with the Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 41 of 2007 concerning the quality process which states that competitive advantage is the potential or ability of an institution to compete, namely excellence in certain fields that are not owned by other parties.

Competitive advantage in this era is a very important outcome. This competitive advantage is closely related to the quality of education, the better and more professional the management of

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education, the more competitive the education. Kadi stated that educational innovation is a stage that is continuously implemented due to several kinds of causes, namely external causes and internal causes. External causes, for example, changes in human life. Internal causes are described as the spirit of developing and fulfilling their needs. The correlation between these two causes has the effect of creating a process of increasing intellectual and technological knowledge and changes that continue to be implemented. Innovation acts as a value obligation while continuing to develop and expand in the intellectual aspect, because teaching is a place to create humans into individuals who are ready to face the obstacles of an ever-changing era. Education is prepared to always be ready to face the changing era (Kadi, T., & Awwaliyah, 2017). Innovation does not deviate from the school's vision and mission.

Improving teacher competence through webinars. A teacher as a competent teacher has the duty to take full responsibility in guiding, directing, assessing, and training students so that they are ready to continue and improve the goals that have been fought for by parents or previous generations. A teacher is a person who shapes the behaviour of the nation's children through improving the expected aspects of behaviour and values. In this process, the teacher's harmony, direction, support/motivation, attention, and craft are required. Therefore, the task of a teacher is difficult to replace with anyone, including by the sophistication of technology, even though education and learning technology has increased dramatically, because technology cannot provide harmony, direction, support/motivation, attention, and craft.

The picture hints that a teacher bears the full responsibility of preparing the youth to be ready as the successor of the country's struggle. Teachers have the task of preparing the younger generation to develop as individuals who master intellectual knowledge, technological sophistication, and creativity, and have a good personality, and therefore are able to be responsible to themselves, family, community, and country, and most importantly to Allah swt. This description gives an understanding that the duties and roles of teachers are actually heavy. Therefore, in order to carry out this task effectively, teachers must fulfil predetermined requirements. Among these are having four competencies in the field of education. Focusing on an in-depth understanding of competence is mandatory because the educational process and teaching and learning process is not only about educating by channeling intellectual knowledge, techniques, and creativity, but also developing the manners, personality, and morals of students. Mastery of the material taught, the method of delivery, and the personality of the teacher have a major impact on the growth and development of students.

The advantages of using webinars are networks that can be opened or accessed at any time and place according to a set schedule, minimise cost expenditure, and can be opened / accessed by many participants. The network / world wide web (WWW) is the main influence in opening webinars. Using webinars, similar seminars appear in video form. Web conferencing software is used to maintain/manage and interact (Durahman, N., Noer, Z. M., & Hidayat, 2019). Webinars on education, teacher duties, teacher competencies and those related to teachers are carried out at MTs NDM Surakarta as an effort to increase school competitiveness through improving teacher competence. Teacher performance evaluations are carried out regularly for the common good. Evaluation is carried out to find out what is lacking then prepare solutions for the future and implement them.

Comprehensive low-cost leadership as an effort to improve school competitiveness. A cost leadership strategy refers to a series of coordinated steps taken to produce a product or service with a selling value that can be accepted by the lowest consumers when compared to competitors. Companies that implement a cost leadership strategy generally offer standardised products or services to the industry's most common customers. Innovation, which includes new methods and techniques in production and distribution, designed to enable companies to operate more time- and cost-efficiently, is crucial to the successful implementation of a cost leadership strategy (Maryani, L., & Chaniago, 2019). Strategy is a series of steps taken to achieve a goal. Strategy plays a crucial role in achieving goals, because it contains the steps, stages, and various efforts needed to achieve these goals. Every activity carried out in a programme must be supported by appropriate steps.

Precision determines whether a strategy can influence the success of an activity. Strategies

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include successful and useful steps that are implemented to achieve the objectives of the activity. To improve the school's competitiveness, the principal implemented an overall low-cost leadership strategy, with a focused low-cost strategy. This is done by developing a best cost provider strategy, becoming a needs provider, examining the cost of each activity, managing costs at a lower level, reducing overall costs by reducing the cost of some activities, eliminating some lowcost activities in a value chain, and determining alternative packages.

Although there are some cottage subjects, the learning system at MTs NDM Surakarta does not differentiate between general and cottage subjects, both run simultaneously. Like other schools, the principal who also serves as the leader of the boarding school, is certainly not an easy task, but with an effective leadership style, he managed to maintain his position as Principal for many years. MTs NDM integrates the general education curriculum with the Islamic curriculum, which is implemented simultaneously so that students get general and Islamic knowledge in a balanced manner. As revealed by (Rizki, 2022) Integration between religious and general science aims to overcome the striking difference between the two, which arises from thinking that separates religion as a separate source of truth and science as a source of truth that also stands alone.

Islamic educational institutions must teach and apply the teachings of the Quran and Hadith taught by the Prophet. On the other hand, Islamic teachings also teach humanity to unite, love each other, forgive each other, avoid lies, and avoid hating and slandering each other, which can damage friendships between people (Asil, I., Lutfiani, R., Amalia, F., & Syarifudin, 2023). Integration of general, religious and tahfidz subjects. The difference in innovation made by the Principal is to implement a curriculum that uses Arabic and English, in line with the general education curriculum of the boarding school, but also the Quranic language and English. Most boarding schools also use both languages, but MTs NDM Surakarta uses the Quran language which is different from other boarding schools. Other boarding schools are more specific such as special boarding schools for Taihfidz or special boarding schools for students, but MTs NDM Surakarta applies these 3 systems. Islamic boarding schools also pay attention to every word spoken by students, although they are required to use Arabic and English, students also need to pay attention to the arrangement of spoken words in accordance with the rules of Nahwu and Shorof. Students are absolutely not allowed to say other than these two words except during the learning process of Islamic sciences such as science, social studies, civics and others. The results of the implementation of the dispute using English Baihasa AIrab and this language are many alumni who graduated from MTs NDM Surakarta and were able to continue their studies abroad.

The important role of parents and the community. Head of MTs NDM Surakarta in an effort to improve school competitiveness Implement strategies to increase active student involvement through measurement and assessment of student learning outcomes carried out in activities related to class promotion. This activity provides an opportunity for schools to obtain feedback from students which can be an indicator of the achievement of learning objectives at MTs NDM Surakarta. Evaluation and assessment of learning outcomes is carried out regularly every year by involving cooperation between teachers, principals, and representatives from each class. The stages of teaching and learning that are different from other educational institutions cannot be separated from community support. The principal in an effort to increase the number of students applies a strategy to increase the number of students in the MTs NDM Surakarta environment. Increasing the participation of players in this community opens up opportunities to work as a player in the maisyairaikait school which allows both to share various knowledge, skills, and various positive values in the life of play.

The Head of MTs NDM Surakarta, said that in order to improve the quality of learning, he implemented a strategy to improve the quality of community service that serves as a support for every programme run by the school. The location of MTs NDM Surakarta next to the Kauman Mosque is used to organise various community activities, such as Friday prayers. The utilisation of this public facility not only provides benefits in terms of school utilisation, but also to train students and all school community members to be able to interact and mingle with the community. Facing challenges or obstacles to compete with other schools require good cooperation from all

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stakeholders. Principals are able to mobilise teachers, employees, students, in overcoming various challenges faced by schools in improving school competitiveness (Mildawati, T., Usman, S., & Usman, 2024).

The challenges faced by the principal in an effort to improve the competitiveness of MTs NDM Surakarta. The environment around the school affects the learning process. A calm, cool and refreshing environment is important to prevent student boredom while learning at school. This kind of environment needs to be created, because it can motivate students to learn well. However, creating an ideal learning environment is not easy, considering that there are still various factors that can interfere with the creation of optimal learning conditions. Non-social factors, such as the less strategic location of the school, the lack of good and complete learning facilities (even though the school needs them), and the lack of other school facilities, are significant factors. Other facilities cause the environment around the school to be less conducive, especially during break times. The head of MTs NDM Surakarta said that the main hall of the school is quite prominent and the main hall of the school is narrow. This is because the school is located right in the middle of a village. So, it was quite difficult to widen the main hall. After that, the main hall was widened by making the best use of the main hall. For example, for seating, gathering, meeting and so on.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of research on the principal's efforts to improve the quality of education at MTs NDM Surakarta, it can be concluded that the principal actively implements five main strategies, namely: optimising infrastructure management, learning innovations based on the excellence of other institutions, increasing teacher competence through webinars, integrating the general curriculum, religion, and tahfidz, and involving parents and the community. This strategy directly answers the research objective, which is to reveal the form and effectiveness of the principal's efforts in improving the quality of education. Theoretically, the findings reinforce the importance of transformative and collaborative leadership in the context of Islamic education management. Practically, the results provide an overview of implementable strategies that can be replicated by other schools in similar conditions. However, limited infrastructure is still an obstacle, so synergy between the principal and all stakeholders is needed to improve the competitiveness of the institution in a sustainable manner.

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