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Formulating Character Development Policy in Vocational Higher Education: A Qualitative Study and the V-CODE Model

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Abstract

This study investigates the formulation and implementation of character development policies in vocational higher education institutions in Indonesia. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through panel surveys involving key stakeholders at multiple institutional levels, including lecturers, department heads, and vice directors. The study explores stakeholders' perceptions regarding the urgency of character education, the values to be instilled, implementation strategies, challenges, and evaluation mechanisms. Findings reveal a strong consensus on the importance of integrating character development into the core curriculum, yet also highlight critical challenges such as fragmented policy implementation, limited faculty capacity, and inadequate evaluation systems. National regulations are recognized as valuable frameworks, but their operationalization at the institutional level remains inconsistent. To address these gaps, the study introduces the V-CODE Model (Vocational Character-Oriented Development & Evaluation), a conceptual framework comprising five interconnected components: driving factors, stakeholder involvement, policy formulation, implementation strategies, and evaluation mechanisms. The model emphasizes participatory policy design, curriculum-wide integration, and feedback loops reinforcing continuous improvement. This research contributes to theory and practice by offering a contextually grounded model to guide vocational institutions in building sustainable and impactful character education systems. The study also provides policy recommendations for aligning institutional practices with national education goals and labor market expectations.

Keywords: character education, vocational higher education, policy formulation, qualitative research, V-CODE Model, curriculum integration, stakeholder involvement

A. INTRODUCTION

Vocational higher education institutions are strategically responsible for producing technically competent graduates with strong character traits to meet the challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Society 5.0 challenges. Despite the growing demand for adaptive, ethical, and collaborative human resources, character development often receives inadequate attention in institutional policies, as many vocational institutions continue to prioritize technical skill enhancement and industry-aligned curricula over non-technical competencies such as integrity, leadership, and social responsibility (Darmawan, 2021). A study on pre-service vocational teacher education revealed that character education had not reached an optimal level, even though such non-technical competencies are essential to graduates' readiness for the global labor market (Jaedun et al., 2024). These findings underscore the urgent need for a more effective and contextual model of character education within vocational education settings, where character values are complementary and foundational to students' competitive edge in an increasingly digital and globalized world.

Although various studies have underscored the importance of integrating hard and soft skills—including character—in higher education, limited attention has been given to how character development policies are specifically formulated within vocational education institutions. Existing policies often remain normative, relying on declarative values without clear, measurable implementation frameworks, creating a gap between the ideals embedded in policy documents and their practical realization in the field (Dekawati & Kurnaeti, 2023). While some evidence suggests that life skills policies can positively influence student autonomy, the absence of robust

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evaluation systems undermines their effectiveness. (Rabiman et al., 2022) further highlight the difficulty of implementing foundational value-based teachings—such as those inspired by Ki Hadjar Dewantara's tamansiswa philosophy—in vocational settings, pointing to structural inconsistencies in the policy application. This situation is compounded by the lack of a well-defined policy framework that hinders effective monitoring and assessment of character development outcomes. In response, (Zhang, 2023) emphasizes the importance of cross-functional collaboration—among counselors, ideological and political instructors, and vocational subject teachers—to overcome these policy formulation shortcomings and cultivate morally grounded and contextually relevant graduates. These findings reveal an urgent need for a structured and measurable policy implementation framework to bridge the gap between policy idealism and field-level execution in vocational character education.

Practice-based curricula and strong collaboration with industry partners characterize vocational higher education in Indonesia. However, the absence of a comprehensive national framework for character development has resulted in fragmented institutional approaches, leading to significant variation in character education practices and a lack of integrated, evidence-based, and participatory policy strategies (Mahanani et al., 2022). While character values are nominally present in courses such as Civic Education and religious instruction, their implementation remains inconsistent and underdeveloped due to the absence of clear indicators and measurable evaluation frameworks. (Quari, 2024) although industrial work culture has introduced values such as discipline and responsibility into vocational schools, these efforts remain sporadic and lack systemic national standardization. Meanwhile, (Yuan & Jiang, 2023) propose a data-driven and innovative policy formulation model using data mining and self-organizing maps (SOM) to identify key variables influencing educational outcomes, including character development. Their approach demonstrates the potential for more holistic and evidence-informed policy-making that integrates technical and non-technical dimensions. Furthermore, policy evaluations on revitalizing vocational education systems reveal that deficits in soft skills and character formation directly impact graduate quality, underlining the urgent need for a more comprehensive and structured character development policy strategy (Pradipta et al., 2021).

Policy functions as a foundational instrument in aligning educational programs, and in the context of character development, it plays a normative and strategic role—guiding curriculum design, faculty development, student engagement, and learning outcome evaluation. A well-structured and inclusive policy can serve as a critical lever for embedding character values into the institutional culture of vocational education. Effective character development policy formulation in vocational higher education requires a comprehensive understanding of key stakeholders' perspectives, experiences, and aspirations—including lecturers, program administrators, students, and industry partners. Qualitative methods provide a robust approach to capturing these diverse inputs, allowing researchers to identify local wisdom and best practices that support the development of contextually relevant and actionable policies. This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the processes, challenges, and stakeholder expectations in shaping character education policies, generating insights that contribute to academic discourse and offer practical guidance for vocational institutions in creating sustainable and impactful character development frameworks.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Character Education in the Context of Vocational Higher Education

Character education in vocational higher education (VHE) has gained growing attention as a vital component in shaping graduates who are technically proficient and morally grounded. Unlike general academic institutions, vocational education emphasizes experiential, hands-on learning that mirrors real-world industrial practices. This context demands the integration of character values—such as integrity, responsibility, discipline, collaboration, and adaptability—into educational programs to align with the expectations of employers and the ethical demands of the modern workplace (Lv et al., 2023; Wei, 2024). Studies have shown that embedding moral and character development within vocational curricula enhances employability and workplace readiness by fostering desirable attitudes and behaviors alongside technical competence (An & Abdrahim, 2024). Educational reforms such as the "Three-All Education" model exemplify efforts to holistically merge moral instruction with professional training, supporting the development of both skills and ethical awareness among students (Lv et al., 2023; Wei, 2024).

To meet the evolving demands of the labor market, VHE institutions are encouraged to revise their pedagogical models and strengthen partnerships with industry stakeholders. This involves incorporating elements like labor education, which promotes appreciation for hard work and strengthens work ethic, and psychological

health education, which supports both mental well-being and character formation (Lan, 2022; Zhao & Wang, 2022). Moreover, moral and ethical training in vocational education has been linked to enhanced social responsibility and civic engagement, further reinforcing the need for a multidisciplinary approach that combines ideological, practical, and technology-driven education (Chen, 2023; Du, 2023). A well-integrated character education framework in VHE is essential for nurturing technically capable and ethically responsible graduates prepared to thrive in complex, globalized work environments (An & Abdrahim, 2024; Wu et al., 2023).

Policy and Governance in Character Education

The successful formulation and implementation of character education policies in vocational institutions demand a well-defined and strategic governance framework. Such policies must go beyond aspirational declarations and offer clear operational mechanisms integrating character development into curricula, co-curricular programs, and the broader institutional culture. Effective governance also entails leadership commitment, faculty development, quality assurance, and continuous evaluation to ensure coherence and consistency (Asri & Deviv, 2023; Putri et al., 2020). Without a structured approach, institutions may experience fragmented efforts and inconsistent practices that weaken the intended impact of character education. Research further emphasizes that governance structures must align with institutional missions and community values, with clear educational policies and leadership engagement as key drivers (Adam-Yawson et al., 2021; Susilo et al., 2022).

Additionally, participatory collaboration among stakeholders—including educators, students, parents, and administrators—is crucial in fostering a supportive environment for character education (Fajri & Dafit, 2022; Harun et al., 2020). In the Indonesian context, government-driven efforts to integrate character values into curricula have been strengthened through school-family partnerships that extend character learning into students' daily lives (Dewi et al., 2023; Lintong et al., 2021). Leadership at the institutional level plays a central role in advocating for these values, aligning policies with school goals, and promoting a culture of integrity and accountability (Hanum et al., 2024; Matondang et al., 2022). Regular assessments—both qualitative and quantitative—are necessary to monitor implementation and adapt policies responsively (Fitria et al., 2022; Suparmanto et al., 2023). In the absence of such comprehensive and responsive governance, disparities in implementation will persist. Therefore, institutional leaders must prioritize character education as part of their operational mandate to ensure long-term effectiveness and prepare students for ethical and social responsibilities in future workplaces (Engkus et al., 2021; Prasetyo et al., 2020; Subekti & Alinurdin, 2021; Yuliana et al., 2021).

Pedagogical Models and Strategies

Various pedagogical models have been widely implemented in vocational education to promote character development alongside technical skill acquisition. Approaches such as project-based learning (PBL), experiential learning, problem-based learning, and workplace simulation provide authentic, real-world contexts where students can internalize values like responsibility, integrity, teamwork, and ethical decision-making (Lizunkov et al., 2020; Yulianti et al., 2023). For instance, PBL engages students in collaborative projects that mirror workplace challenges, fostering critical thinking, communication, and interpersonal skills essential for professional environments (Yulianti et al., 2023). Similarly, experiential learning emphasizes hands-on engagement, allowing learners to reflect on their experiences and develop a deeper sense of personal responsibility and ethical awareness (Lee & Hsu, 2021). Problem-based learning (PBL), by exposing students to complex real-life problems, nurtures ownership of the learning process and cultivates independent thinking and accountability (Suyitno et al., 2022).

Beyond these instructional models, complementary strategies such as mentoring, reflective journaling, and civic engagement further strengthen character formation in vocational education. Mentorship provides students with guidance and role models who reinforce ethical behavior and professional conduct, while reflective practices encourage self-awareness and critical self-assessment throughout the learning journey (Nugroho, 2022). Civic engagement programs, including community service and social involvement initiatives, offer meaningful opportunities for students to apply their values in real-world settings, reinforcing social responsibility and empathy (Pradana & Sundawa, 2023). These multi-dimensional pedagogical approaches create a holistic learning environment where vocational students build workplace competencies and cultivate the moral and civic dispositions for responsible citizenship and lifelong personal growth (Jinxing, 2023).

Stakeholder Involvement and Participatory Approaches

Formulating character education policies in vocational institutions is most effective when it embraces the diverse perspectives of stakeholders, including educators, administrators, students, alumni, industry representatives, and community leaders. Participatory approaches—such as focus group discussions, needs assessments, and collaborative policy design—bridge institutional objectives with stakeholder expectations, leading to more contextually grounded and inclusive policy outcomes (Pajriah et al., 2023; Sharma & Kumar, 2023). In particular, the involvement of industry actors ensures alignment between character education and labor market demands, thereby equipping graduates with the values and soft skills employers seek (Pan et al., 2020; Ramraj, 2023). Research shows that industry-academia partnerships enhance educational relevance and foster mutually beneficial outcomes for students, institutions, and employers (Menon et al., 2021; Pattison, 2021).

Beyond institutional and industry collaboration, engagement with families and local communities is vital in reinforcing character education. Partnerships between schools and families help establish a unified value system that supports character development within and beyond the classroom (Marzuki & Samsuri, 2022; Surikova & González, 2022). The establishment of tripartite collaborations involving schools, families, and communities has been shown to enhance the sustainability and impact of character education programs (Dirgantari & Cahyani, 2023; Muassomah et al., 2020; Nurdiana, 2021). Moreover, feedback mechanisms that enable continuous input from stakeholders contribute to adaptive policy refinement and responsiveness to evolving educational and social contexts (Fagrell et al., 2020; Marzuki & Samsuri, 2022). Ultimately, collaborative and participatory policy development fosters a sense of ownership, strengthens accountability, and supports the creation of character education frameworks that prepare students for ethical engagement in a dynamic workforce (Pan et al., 2020; Pattison, 2021; Sharma & Kumar, 2023).

Challenges in Character Education Implementation

Despite increasing recognition of the importance of character education in vocational institutions, its implementation continues to face various systemic challenges. Among the most pressing are limited policy integration, insufficient faculty training, and inconsistent assessment mechanisms, all compounded by an institutional emphasis on technical-skill-based performance indicators (Han et al., 2023; Iqbal et al., 2022). Many vocational institutions lack clear operational guidelines that embed character development into curricular and co-curricular programs, leading to fragmented efforts and under-prioritization of ethical instruction (Iqbal et al., 2022). Faculty members often receive little to no training in character education pedagogy, limiting their capacity to effectively teach values-based content (Haasler, 2020; Liszka & Walawender, 2021). The dominance of technical metrics in evaluating student and institutional success further diminishes the perceived value of soft skills such as ethics, teamwork, and civic responsibility (Iqbal et al., 2022; Supriatna et al., 2023).

Institutional culture and leadership commitment are critical yet unevenly distributed factors in character education success. In some vocational institutions, character education is treated as an integral part of the institutional mission, while in others, it is sidelined in favor of technical training (Bariyah et al., 2024). The absence of strong leadership support can result in initiatives lacking both direction and sustainability (Ma et al., 2024). Compounding these issues are resource constraints, including limited funding for curriculum development, professional training, and program evaluation, which inhibit the scalability and longevity of character education efforts (Fitrian & Sugiyono, 2020). Addressing these multi-layered challenges requires an integrated approach emphasizing strategic policy alignment, investment in faculty development, improved assessment tools, and a cultural shift toward holistic educational outcomes that value technical competence and ethical character.

C. Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the perspectives of key stakeholders regarding the formulation of character development policies in vocational higher education institutions. The research focused on understanding how character education is perceived, implemented, and evaluated and identifying the challenges and strategic considerations involved in policy-making processes. Data were collected using a structured panel survey distributed via email, allowing for flexibility and accessibility among respondents across various institutions. The target participants included individuals occupying strategic and instructional roles, specifically at the Director and Deputy Director levels, Head of Department or Head of Study Program, and lecturers in vocational colleges. These respondents were selected through purposive sampling

to ensure the inclusion of informed voices with direct involvement in educational governance and character development practices.

The panel survey comprised 12 open-ended questions in four thematic areas: general perceptions, implementation strategies, policy formulation, and evaluation frameworks. These questions were designed to elicit in-depth qualitative responses and to allow participants to express their views freely based on their institutional experiences. Topics ranged from the perceived urgency of character education and relevant values to be instilled to practical strategies for implementation, policy design processes, and suitable indicators for evaluating student character development. By structuring the questions in this manner, the study sought to capture a holistic view of character education as experienced and envisioned by practitioners in the vocational education sector. Responses from the survey were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved an iterative process of coding, categorizing, and identifying key themes that emerged across participant responses. This method allowed the researcher to systematically organize insights and draw meaningful conclusions about the current state and potential direction of character development policy in vocational higher education. The analysis was supported by NVivo software to manage the qualitative data and enhance the rigor of thematic coding and interpretation.

D. Results and Discussions

Perceived Urgency of Character Development

Stakeholders at all levels of vocational higher education institutions perceive character development as urgent. This urgency is particularly emphasized in light of the evolving nature of Generation Z, whose learning preferences and behavioral patterns differ significantly from previous cohorts. Lecturers and academic leaders argue that vocational graduates must be technically proficient, morally grounded, and emotionally mature to navigate the increasing complexity of real-world challenges and professional demands. One program head stressed that the deterioration of student character—particularly in discipline, communication, and social etiquette—is partly due to technological overexposure and a lack of structured reinforcement within the academic environment. Meanwhile, a department head highlighted that character is essential for preparing students to succeed in internships and professional employment, calling it "very urgent" to ensure a student's long-term professional viability. Interestingly, the Vice Director noted that while the urgency of character education may be equally important across academic and vocational settings, the form of development must differ due to the practical, case-oriented nature of vocational training. He noted that in vocational education, character traits such as discipline, resilience, and integrity are critical for students who face real-life challenges and deliver results under pressure.

To illustrate the convergence of these views, the following table summarizes the urgency perceptions based on respondent roles:

Table 1. Perceived Urgency of Character Development by Respondent Role

Respondent Role	Perceived Urgency	Key Justification
Lecturer	Very urgent, especially in facing IR 4.0 and global competition	Character values like honesty and teamwork are seen as keys to success beyond technical skills
Head of Department	Very urgent for workplace readiness (e.g., internships and employment)	Emphasis on teamwork, responsibility, and work ethics
Head of Study Program	Extremely urgent due to moral decline among Gen Z	Need for manners, discipline, leadership, and a stronger work ethic
Vice Director	Urgency is equally shared with academic education but with specific vocational nuances.	Practical learning demands discipline and resilience for students to handle real cases effectively.

Source: Research data, 2025

These insights reflect a shared understanding that technical expertise alone is insufficient; what distinguishes successful vocational graduates in the modern labor market is their ability to act ethically, communicate effectively, and adaptively respond to challenges. This aligns with the broader discourse in vocational education, where soft skills and character formation are increasingly recognized as essential complements to technical competencies.

Core Values to Be Instilled in Vocational Students

There is a remarkable consensus among respondents regarding the core character values that should be instilled in vocational students. While the exact phrasing and prioritization may vary, values such as discipline,

integrity, responsibility, teamwork, and adaptability consistently emerged across responses. These values are foundational for individual development and professional success in industrial and societal contexts. Several respondents emphasized that character development in vocational settings must extend beyond surface-level behaviors. A lecturer noted that students must be taught to be "honest, disciplined, critical, and innovative" with strong problem-solving capabilities—qualities that are indispensable in applied fields. A head of the department highlighted the growing need for students to develop effective communication, technological adaptability, and a cooperative mindset. Similarly, a program head stressed the relevance of values such as politeness (adab), self-confidence, and work ethic, particularly concerning current challenges faced by Gen Z. Meanwhile, the Vice Director offered a distilled list of priority traits, including resilience, dedication, and collaboration, reinforcing the view that technical mastery is insufficient without character depth.

To provide a clearer view, the following table synthesizes the values most frequently mentioned by respondents, categorized and clustered thematically:

Table 2. Core Character Values Identified by Respondents

Value Cluster	Specific Values	Rationale
Foundational Ethics	Honesty, Integrity, Responsibility	Essential for trust-building, academic honesty, and long-term success
Workplace Readiness	Discipline, Punctuality, Work Ethic	Aligns with expectations from the industry regarding reliability and professionalism
Cognitive & Emotional	Critical Thinking, Resilience, Motivation, Emotional Intelligence	Helps students navigate uncertainty and problem-solving under pressure
Social & Communicative	Teamwork, Leadership, Communication Skills, Empathy	Crucial for collaboration in both learning environments and industrial teams
Cultural & Spiritual	Adab (Manners), Respect, Spiritual Values	Reinforces identity, social sensitivity, and moral grounding in diverse workplace environments
21st-Century Literacies	Adaptability, Digital Literacy, Creativity, Entrepreneurial Spirit	Addresses global demands and promotes innovative, future-ready graduates

Source: Research data, 2025

These findings strongly align with international frameworks on holistic vocational education, such as the 21st-Century Skills Framework and Indonesia's Profil Pelajar Pancasila, both of which advocate for a blend of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies. The emphasis on adaptability, leadership, and moral resilience reflects a broader shift in vocational education toward preparing "whole individuals"—technically trained, ethically sound, and socially responsive graduates.

Existing Initiatives and Perceived Effectiveness

The study revealed that character development initiatives exist in many vocational institutions, yet their effectiveness and consistency remain limited. Most respondents acknowledged the existence of programs such as student leadership training, disciplinary workshops, project-based team assignments, and student organization involvement. However, these efforts are often fragmented and not fully embedded into the broader institutional ecosystem. From the lecturers' perspective, character education is often introduced during student orientation (e.g., basic leadership training) and later reinforced through mentoring or integrated course activities. However, as one respondent noted, "character violations still occur frequently, such as cheating during exams or violating campus norms," signaling that these programs may lack depth or sustainability. The Head of Department observed that some values are introduced during academic projects, where teamwork and communication are emphasized, but these efforts are rarely coordinated across the institution. Meanwhile, the Program Head at POLINEMA highlighted that despite institutional initiatives, the campus environment—shaped by nearby entertainment venues and social influences—often counteracts character-building efforts.

The Vice Director acknowledged that while institutional policies outline desirable character traits, they are often too broad and not operationalized effectively at the program or classroom level. A key insight from this level of leadership is that without targeted focus and repetition, character education becomes a symbolic gesture rather than a lived institutional practice. The table below summarizes the types of initiatives mentioned and the challenges associated with their implementation:

Table 3. Existing Character Education Initiatives and Challenges

Initiative Type	Examples from Institutions	Perceived Challenges
Leadership & Discipline Training	Basic leadership training, orientation programs	One-off events; limited long-term impact

Initiative Type	Examples from Institutions	Perceived Challenges
Academic Integration	Character values embedded in class projects, teamwork-based tasks	Not uniformly applied across courses or departments
Extracurricular Engagement	Student organizations, competitions, community service	Participation is not universal; impact varies based on student involvement
Top-Down Institutional Policies	Values listed by management as guidelines for student conduct	Overly broad; lacks clarity in operationalization at the classroom level
Mentoring & Role Modeling	Lecturer-guided projects, research collaborations	Dependent on individual lecturer initiative; not structurally reinforced institutionally
Industry Involvement	Feedback loops with employers, character-related inputs from industry	Mostly symbolic; no structured implementation or follow-up

Source: Research data, 2025

While various character-building programs are present, there is a clear need for institutional alignment, consistent messaging, and structural integration. Without a cohesive system that ensures reinforcement across academic, extracurricular, and environmental levels, these initiatives risk being seen as peripheral rather than integral to vocational education.

Strategies for Character Development Implementation

The data suggest that stakeholders in vocational higher education recognize the importance of implementing character education through structured, context-driven, and repetitive strategies. Rather than relying on one-time workshops or top-down rules, many respondents advocate for character development approaches embedded into the daily educational experience in academic and practical contexts. Lecturers commonly propose pedagogical strategies such as project-based learning (PBL), problem-based learning (PBL), and character mentoring. These methods allow students to encounter real-life challenges that demand technical competence, integrity, collaboration, and decision-making. For instance, one lecturer emphasized that courses should include character and academic rubrics, allowing soft skills such as responsibility and honesty to be evaluated consistently. Another respondent noted the importance of reflection—encouraging students to evaluate their growth and interpersonal conduct throughout the learning process.

From a managerial perspective, the Head of Department suggested strategies that blend academic immersion with student engagement in faculty-led activities, such as research projects, community service, and student competitions. These engagements foster ownership, confidence, and resilience. The Program Head emphasized motivational programming and career awareness activities, helping students see the real-world relevance of character in workplace success. Meanwhile, the Vice Director proposed an iterative, layered strategy, where character values are repeated and reinforced at the institutional and classroom levels—"even weekly at the start of class"—to embed values gradually and sustainably. The table below organizes these strategies based on their primary implementation level:

Table 4. Implementation Strategies for Character Development

Level	Strategy	Purpose / Benefit
Institutional	Orientation training, motivational seminars, leadership workshops	Introduce values early and establish foundational awareness
Curricular	PBL, case-based learning, integrated rubrics for character evaluation	Reinforce character through authentic learning and assessment
Faculty-Led Initiatives	Student involvement in research, competitions, community service	Build confidence, teamwork, and leadership through experiential learning
Weekly Repetition	Weekly value reinforcement at the start of class	Promote long-term internalization through consistency
Mentoring & Modeling	Role modeling by lecturers, feedback, and reflection sessions	Strengthen character through guided practice and self-awareness
Industry Collaboration	Guest lectures, industry practitioner mentorship	Provide real-world expectations and alignment with workplace character standards.

Source: Research data, 2025

These strategies illustrate a growing recognition that character cannot be developed through isolated interventions. Instead, it must be built systematically and consistently across the entire student lifecycle, from entry to graduation. A hybrid approach that blends formal learning, co-curricular

engagement, and industry exposure appears to be the most promising pathway to instilling enduring values in vocational students.

Challenges in Implementation

Despite the strong awareness of its importance, the implementation of character development in vocational higher education continues to face systemic and cultural challenges. These barriers arise at various levels—from individual faculty constraints to institutional misalignment and external social influences that shape student behavior. One of the most recurring issues reported by respondents is the lack of faculty capacity and training in character education. While lecturers may recognize the importance of character development, not all are equipped with the skills or pedagogical approaches to integrate it meaningfully into their teaching. A Head of Department noted that "not all lecturers can guide character values," with many under time constraints and focused primarily on delivering technical content. Another critical challenge lies in the fragmentation of institutional efforts. As the Vice Director highlighted, the absence of a unified vision across programs and departments can lead to inconsistencies in character-related messaging. This is further compounded by weak collaboration among units, making it difficult to implement cross-cutting initiatives or ensure reinforcement at different levels of the academic structure.

Respondents also cited cultural and behavioral resistance from students and within student organizations. For example, hierarchical traditions, seniority cultures, and arrogance within student groups were reported as hindrances to character-building, creating environments where unhealthy behaviors may be normalized or left unaddressed. In addition, external influences such as social media, entertainment culture, and off-campus environments were seen as competing forces that often contradict the values promoted within campus programs. The following table summarizes the main challenges reported by stakeholders:

Table 5. Key Challenges in Character Education Implementation

Challenge Area	Specific Issues Reported	Impact on Implementation
Faculty Readiness	Limited pedagogical skills in character education; time constraints	Lecturers focus on technical content; character education is often sidelined
Institutional Alignment	Lack of shared vision among programs, departments, and leadership	Inconsistent implementation; difficulty sustaining long-term initiatives
Student Culture	Negative traditions in student organizations; resistance to change	Reinforcement of unproductive or unethical behaviors
External Influences	Social media, entertainment culture, off-campus distractions	Disruption of value internalization: students exposed to conflicting value systems
Policy Fragmentation	Existing policies are too broad; lack of operational guidelines	No clear roadmap for faculty or departments to act upon

Source: Research data, 2025

These findings highlight that effective character education cannot rely solely on well-intentioned programs or isolated policies. It requires capacity-building for educators, institutional consistency, and cultural transformation within and beyond the classroom. Addressing these challenges will ensure that character development is not just aspirational—but operational and impactful.

Policy Formulation: Principles and Stakeholder Involvement

Formulating effective character development policy in vocational higher education requires more than defining aspirational values—it necessitates a structured, participatory, and context-sensitive framework. Across all levels of respondents, there is strong agreement that character policy must be grounded in operational clarity, legal reinforcement, and inclusive collaboration involving internal and external stakeholders. Lecturers and program heads agree that policies should contain clear objectives, specific implementation strategies, and evaluative mechanisms. For instance, one respondent emphasized that policy documents must define the "what," "how," "who," and "to what extent" regarding character formation efforts. Character initiatives often become symbolic and fragmented without clarity on roles and responsibilities.

Regarding formulation principles, several respondents highlighted the need to align character education policy with institutional vision and national frameworks (e.g., Profil Pelajar Pancasila, Permendikbud, or guidelines from the Directorate General of Vocational Education). Others stressed that policies must not be top-down but developed collaboratively through inputs from the academic

community, student organizations, and alumni. The Vice Director added that the involvement of student bodies and organizations is critical, as it fosters ownership and collective responsibility rather than passive compliance. External collaboration is also considered essential. Both program heads and directors suggested engaging with industry partners, professional associations, and community leaders to ensure that promoted character values reflect workplace expectations and societal needs. This aligns with the vocational education mission to produce skilled workers and ethical, socially responsible citizens. The following table outlines the proposed actors and their roles in character policy formulation:

Table 6. Key Stakeholders in Character Policy Formulation

Stakeholder Group	Role in Policy Formulation	Rationale / Contribution
Institutional Leadership	Set policy direction, allocate resources, and ensure integration with strategic plans.	Provides authority and institutional alignment
Lecturers & Academic Staff	Implement policies through curriculum and mentoring; give feedback on feasibility.	Ensure practical implementation and contextual relevance.
Students & Student Orgs	Provide perspective from learner experience; co-design programs	Promote ownership, engagement, and relevancy to youth culture
Industry Representatives	Advise on workplace-relevant values and expectations	Align character goals with real-world labor market needs
Alumni & Employers	Share feedback on graduate performance and character gaps	Offer insights for policy improvement based on post-graduate outcomes
Government & Regulators	Provide regulatory frameworks, national character profiles, and funding support.	Ensure alignment with national education standards and policy integration.
Parents & Community Leaders	Reinforce character education beyond campus settings	Foster continuity between institutional values and home/community environments

Source: Research data, 2025

These findings suggest that multi-stakeholder engagement is not optional but essential in ensuring that character development policies are contextually grounded and operationally viable. A successful policy will prescribe values, mobilize collective action, reinforce shared responsibilities, and enable adaptive implementation across institutional layers.

Role of National Regulation and Policy Frameworks

The role of national policies and regulatory frameworks—such as those issued by the Ministry of Education and the Directorate General of Vocational Education—is perceived as formative yet underutilized by many respondents. While some stakeholders recognize that such regulations provide direction, legal legitimacy, and policy scaffolding, others express limited awareness or uncertainty about how national policies are translated into institutional-level actions. One Vice Director viewed national regulations as important enablers that should offer top-level guidance, resources, and flexibility for local implementation. He suggested that the Ministry provide a general framework for character development and room for institutions to adopt policies based on their unique context. This includes facilitating local content, supporting funding mechanisms, and encouraging campus-level customization of national character goals.

On the other hand, one department head admitted unfamiliarity with the specific roles of Permendikbud or policies from the Directorate General of Vocational Education, revealing a policy communication gap. This signals that although policies may exist, they are not always socialized effectively across the academic hierarchy. As a result, program and department-level actors may rely more on institutional culture or leadership directives than on regulatory frameworks. Nevertheless, many respondents agree that national policy frameworks are essential in standardizing values, setting benchmarks, and encouraging industry collaboration. These regulations can also serve as accountability instruments—ensuring that character education becomes a measurable and reportable component of institutional performance, particularly in accreditation or curriculum review processes.

The following table summarizes the perceived functions and limitations of national regulation as reported by different stakeholder levels:

Table 7. Perceived Functions and Gaps in National Character Education Policy

Perceived Function	Description	Stakeholder View
Standard Setting	Defines national character values and learning outcomes	Positive – Provides a unifying vision

Perceived Function	Description	Stakeholder View
Legal Legitimacy	Embeds character development into formal education laws and curriculum mandates	Positive – Enables policy formulation.
Implementation Support	Offers guidelines and funding for character education initiatives	Mixed – Seen as needed but unevenly delivered
Flexibility for Local Adaptation	Encourages context-specific customization	Positive – Promotes institutional ownership
Policy Communication	Socialization and training on how to operationalize policies	Negative – Often weak or unclear
Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms	Tools for measuring and reporting character outcomes	Desired – Still lacking in current practice

Source: Research data, 2025

In sum, while national policies are viewed as critical foundations, their impact is constrained by communication, dissemination, and institutional readiness issues. To be more effective, national frameworks must set direction and equip institutions with the tools and autonomy to implement meaningful character education at the grassroots level.

Evaluation Mechanisms and Indicators

Effective evaluation is critical to ensure that character development programs in vocational higher education are implemented and impactful. Across the responses, there is strong agreement that current evaluation mechanisms are still limited, often informal, and tend to prioritize technical or academic outcomes rather than holistic character growth. Several respondents highlighted that feedback from industry partners and internship supervisors remains among the most authentic and valuable evaluation sources. According to the Vice Director, industry input—especially from alumni employers—can reveal which character traits contribute to graduate success or failure in real-world contexts. However, this method is not fully representative, as it excludes students who become entrepreneurs or take non-traditional career paths. To address this, he suggested using alumni surveys that capture self-assessed character growth and retrospective reflection on the most beneficial values post-graduation.

Multiple respondents proposed integrating self-assessment, peer evaluation, and lecturer (academic advisor) reviews at the program level to monitor student character development during their studies. These tools encourage students to reflect on their behavior, engagement, and ethical growth in academic and organizational settings. Some also suggested tracking student participation in campus activities, collaborative tasks, and organizational roles as indirect indicators of leadership, responsibility, and social awareness. Additionally, several lecturers proposed embedding character-related rubrics within academic courses—assessing elements like teamwork, punctuality, and initiative alongside technical learning outcomes. While subjective to some extent, these rubrics can be validated through triangulation across student reflections, lecturer observations, and peer feedback. The table below presents a summary of proposed evaluation mechanisms and their corresponding indicators:

Table 8. Evaluation Mechanisms and Suggested Character Indicators

Evaluation Mechanism	Suggested Indicators	Strengths
Industry / Internship Feedback	Work ethic, punctuality, teamwork, adaptability, integrity	Real-world relevance; employer-based validation
Alumni Survey / Tracer Study	Self-reported character growth, values applied post-graduation	Inclusive of diverse career paths; longitudinal insights
Lecturer Observation	Class participation, punctuality, collaboration, ethical conduct	Ongoing monitoring; context-specific feedback
Self and Peer Assessment	Communication, teamwork, leadership, reflection on personal development	Promotes metacognition and self-awareness
Rubrics in Academic Courses	Initiative, responsibility, integrity, discipline	Integrates character with technical learning
Organizational Involvement Tracking	Roles in student activities, participation in civic engagement	Indicates applied character in social and leadership contexts

Source: Research data, 2025

These findings underscore the need for multi-dimensional and context-sensitive evaluation systems. No single method is sufficient; institutions are encouraged to adopt blended approaches combining direct observation, stakeholder feedback, and self-reflection. More importantly, these

evaluations must be systematized and formally embedded in institutional quality assurance mechanisms so that character development becomes a traceable and accountable component of vocational education.

Curriculum Integration vs Extracurricular Approach

A nearly unanimous consensus emerged among respondents: character education must be integrated into the formal curriculum, not treated as a peripheral or optional component of student development. While extracurricular activities such as student organizations, competitions, and community service are considered valuable, they are insufficient to systematically instill and reinforce character values across the student body. Lecturers and program heads noted that not all students actively participate in extracurricular programs, making relying on these activities for character development inherently exclusionary. One Head of Department stated explicitly, "Character development should be part of daily classroom learning, as not all students are involved in student clubs or organizations." This view is echoed by the Vice Director, who emphasized that curriculum-wide integration—even at the level of individual courses—is essential to consistently reinforce desired character traits such as discipline, integrity, and responsibility.

Respondents also expressed concern that character education often lacks assessment mechanisms, academic recognition, and institutional accountability when relegated to co-curricular initiatives. On the contrary, when embedded into the curriculum, character values can be systematically taught, observed, and evaluated through structured rubrics, reflection tasks, and project-based learning. Nonetheless, extracurricular programs are not without merit. They offer experiential and peer-driven learning environments, ideal for practicing leadership, teamwork, and social responsibility in less formal, more flexible contexts. As such, most respondents advocate for a hybrid model where extracurriculars serve as reinforcement while the curriculum acts as the foundation of character education. The following table compares the two approaches as perceived by study participants:

Table 9. Comparison: Curriculum Integration vs Extracurricular Approach

Aspect	Curriculum Integration	Extracurricular Approach
Inclusivity	Reaches all students through formal instruction	Limited to those who participate voluntarily
Assessment	Allows for structured evaluation and grading	Often lacks formal assessment or rubrics
Consistency	Regular reinforcement through coursework and lecturer modeling	Irregular, depends on student initiative
Institutional Accountability	Tied to academic programs and learning outcomes	Less directly linked to academic or institutional metrics
Learning Context	Structured, guided, and measurable	Experiential, peer-driven, fosters informal learning
Recommended Role	The primary channel for value delivery	Complementary reinforcement and practice arena

Source: Research data, 2025

These insights affirm that character development must be woven into the fabric of teaching and learning in vocational institutions to be systematic, inclusive, and measurable. Extracurricular activities should continue to serve as important practice fields but not as substitutes for a structured, institutionally supported curriculum-based approach to building ethical, adaptive, and socially responsible graduates.

Synthesis and Policy Implications

The findings of this study demonstrate a strong consensus across academic ranks regarding the critical role of character development in vocational higher education. From lecturers to department heads and institutional leadership, there is widespread recognition that technical competencies alone are insufficient in preparing students for the complexities of the modern workforce. What distinguishes vocational graduates today is not merely what they can do but how they act, collaborate, lead, and adapt—all of which are deeply rooted in character. This shared understanding, however, is contrasted by the diversity in implementation practices, varying levels of policy clarity, and fragmented institutional efforts. While lecturers emphasize classroom-based reinforcement through pedagogical strategies such as project-based learning and reflective evaluation, program heads draw attention to the institutional environment and the need for coherent role modeling. Meanwhile, leadership-level perspectives highlight the urgency

of systemic alignment—across departments, policies, and stakeholders—to ensure that character education is sustained and scalable.

The study also reveals a disconnect between national policy frameworks and institutional-level execution. While documents such as Permendikbud or Profil Pelajar Pancasila offer essential direction, their practical translation into classroom actions remains limited due to a lack of dissemination, operational guidelines, and monitoring mechanisms. This signals a need for top-down regulation and bottom-up participation, where national policies are delivered, co-owned, and customized at the program level. Based on the findings, several policy implications emerge:

1. Mandating Curriculum Integration: Institutions should embed character development within all academic programs, using course-level rubrics and authentic assessment strategies to measure technical and ethical competencies.
2. Establishing Institutional Frameworks: A formal policy on character education should include clear objectives, implementation roles, performance indicators, and quality assurance mechanisms.
3. Capacity-Building for Educators: Faculty development programs must train lecturers in character education methodologies, reflective practice, and soft-skill integration in technical subjects.
4. Fostering Participatory Policy Design: Students, alumni, industry partners, and community stakeholders should be engaged in policy formulation to ensure contextual relevance and collective ownership.
5. Strengthening Industry Collaboration: Industry partners should be involved as advisors and co-educators, contributing to curriculum co-design and real-world value alignment.
6. Enhancing Evaluation Systems: Multi-level evaluation tools should be integrated to track character growth, including peer/self-assessment, lecturer observation, and tracer studies.
7. Aligning with National Policy: Institutions should operationalize national regulations into local strategies, with support from the government in the form of funding, training, and monitoring tools.

Character development in vocational education must evolve from a normative ideal to an institutionalized practice supported by clear policies, empowered educators, and cross-sector collaboration. By institutionalizing character as both a value and a competency, vocational institutions can better fulfill their mission of producing graduates who are not only skilled and competitive but also ethical, adaptive, and socially responsible.

Conceptual Framework

This study proposes the V-CODE Model (Vocational Character-Oriented Development & Evaluation)—a conceptual model derived from empirical findings and structured thematic analysis to support the effective formulation and implementation of character development policy in vocational higher education institutions (Figure 1). The V-CODE Model captures character education policy's dynamic and systemic nature, emphasizing the importance of contextual drivers, participatory governance, structured implementation, and evaluative feedback. The model consists of five interrelated components.



Figure 1. V-CODE Model (Vocational Character-Oriented Development & Evaluation)
Source: Research data, 2025

First, Driving Factors represent the contextual urgencies that make character education indispensable, including generational shifts in student behavior, the demands of Industry 4.0, and the need for ethical, adaptive, and socially responsible graduates. Second, Stakeholder Involvement highlights the necessity of engaging multiple actors—lecturers, program heads, institutional leaders, students, alumni, industry partners, and regulatory bodies—to ensure that character policies are relevant, inclusive, and co-owned. Third, the Policy Formulation Framework provides a structured foundation grounded in institutional values and national regulations while balancing top-down strategic direction with bottom-up institutional engagement. Fourth, Implementation Strategies emphasize the integration of character education across the curriculum, project-based and experiential learning, mentoring, and repetition of values within classroom settings, supported by co-curricular reinforcement. Finally, Evaluation and Feedback Mechanisms ensure that character development efforts are measurable, adaptable, and accountable through academic rubrics, stakeholder feedback, tracer studies, and self-reflection tools. The V-CODE Model is intentionally cyclical—recognizing that continuous feedback from evaluation processes must inform and refine policy design and practice over time. As such, this model conceptualizes how character policy should be constructed and enacted and serves as a practical guide for institutions seeking to institutionalize character education as an integral part of their vocational mandate.

E. CONCLUSION

This study explored the formulation of character development policy in vocational higher education through a qualitative panel-based inquiry involving lecturers, department heads, and institutional leaders. The findings affirm a shared understanding across all stakeholder levels of the critical importance of character education in producing graduates who are not only technically competent but also ethically grounded, socially responsible, and adaptable to the evolving demands of the workforce. Respondents consistently emphasized values such as discipline, integrity, responsibility, and collaboration as essential components of graduate identity. Despite character education initiatives within institutions, the study reveals significant challenges regarding policy fragmentation, inconsistent implementation, limited evaluation mechanisms, and lack of stakeholder alignment. Existing programs are often disconnected from broader institutional policies, and faculty members may lack the pedagogical capacity or support to integrate character education into their teaching practices. Moreover, while national regulations provide important direction, they are not always effectively operationalized at the institutional or program level.

The study introduces the V-CODE Model (Vocational Character-Oriented Development & Evaluation) as a conceptual and practical framework to address these gaps. The model underscores the need for context-sensitive policy driven by five interconnected components: (1) driving factors, (2) stakeholder involvement, (3) a structured policy formulation framework, (4) consistent implementation strategies, and (5) multi-dimensional evaluation and feedback mechanisms. This cyclical model offers a roadmap for institutions to align vision, practice, and evaluation in a coherent system that supports long-term character formation. Ultimately, the study contributes to the ongoing discourse on character education in vocational contexts by offering a grounded, stakeholder-informed policy framework. It highlights the need for institutional commitment, participatory governance, and evidence-based practices to ensure character development is aspirational and operational. Future research is encouraged to apply and test the V-CODE Model across different institutional settings to further refine its relevance, adaptability, and effectiveness in shaping ethical vocational graduates for the 21st-century world of work.

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