

Redefining Servant Leadership: The Surprising Strength of Personal Competence in Theological College Graduates' Performance

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Abstract:

Developing leadership competencies is a central objective of theological education; however, empirical evidence on how such competencies influence graduates' job performance within ministry-based contexts has remained limited. This study analyzed the effects of interpersonal and personal competencies on the performance of theological college graduates. Primary data were collected through structured interviews using a questionnaire administered to 77 randomly selected employed alumni of a theological college in Cianjur Regency, drawn from an alum list of 259 potential respondents. The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The findings revealed that personal competency – encompassing self-awareness, integrity, and emotional maturity – had a more substantial influence on alum performance than interpersonal competency, which included empathy and communication. This study contributes empirical evidence from a theological education context, underscoring the importance of integrating personal formation into leadership development. The results suggest that theological institutions should enhance holistic curricula emphasizing character and self-leadership as foundations for effective servant leadership.

Keywords: *Graduates Performance, Interpersonal Competence, Servant Leader, Theological College*

Abstrak:

Pengembangan kompetensi kepemimpinan merupakan tujuan utama dari pendidikan teologi; namun demikian, bukti empiris mengenai bagaimana kompetensi tersebut memengaruhi kinerja lulusan dalam konteks pelayanan masih terbatas. Penelitian ini menganalisis pengaruh kompetensi interpersonal dan kompetensi personal terhadap kinerja lulusan perguruan tinggi teologi. Data primer dikumpulkan melalui wawancara terstruktur dengan menggunakan kuesioner yang diberikan kepada 77 alumni yang telah bekerja dan dipilih secara acak dari daftar alumni perguruan tinggi teologi di Kabupaten Cianjur yang terdiri atas 259 calon responden. Data dianalisis menggunakan metode *Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling* (PLS-SEM). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kompetensi personal – yang mencakup kesadaran diri, integritas, dan kematangan emosional – memiliki pengaruh yang lebih kuat terhadap kinerja alumni dibandingkan kompetensi interpersonal, yang meliputi empati dan komunikasi. Penelitian ini memberikan bukti empiris dalam konteks pendidikan teologi, menegaskan pentingnya integrasi pembentukan pribadi dalam pengembangan kepemimpinan. Hasil penelitian ini menyarankan agar lembaga

pendidikan teologi memperkuat kurikulum holistik yang menekankan karakter dan kepemimpinan diri sebagai landasan bagi kepemimpinan pelayan yang efektif.

Kata Kunci: *Kinerja Lulusan, Kompetensi Interpersonal, Pemimpin Pelayan, Sekolah Tinggi Teologi*

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INTRODUCTION

One of the main goals of education at a theological college is to develop the leadership competencies necessary to manage the church effectively. Church leadership includes competencies in human resources management, decision-making, communication, problem-solving, and developing a vision and strategy for church growth. Effective leadership requires the ability to understand others' perspectives, communicate clearly, resolve conflicts, and build trust (Jentile, 2021). Interpersonal competencies are central to leadership theory and are widely associated with collaboration and organisational effectiveness; however, empirical research on their enactment in professional practice, particularly within theological and ministry contexts, remains limited. Existing studies in secular organisational settings demonstrate that interpersonal competence contributes to enhanced team cohesion, adaptive communication, and goal achievement (Miao et al., 2018; Northouse, 2022). The mechanisms by which these competencies influence leadership effectiveness and job performance among theology graduates and faith-based leaders remain underexplored, underscoring the need for context-specific empirical studies that link interpersonal competence to measurable outcomes in ministry and theological education settings.

Effective leaders usually also demonstrate a high level of personal competence. They are self-aware, able to manage their emotions, and adapt easily to various situations. Personal competence enables leaders to cope with stress, make the right decisions, and maintain a positive attitude even in challenging situations (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). Leaders with strong personal competencies are often more resilient, adaptable, and able to set examples that inspire and motivate their team members.

Interpersonal and personal competencies contribute to holistic self-development, as theological college graduates with strong self-awareness and practical relational skills tend to exhibit greater life satisfaction and achieve personal and professional goals more effectively. In their subsequent roles as church leaders, such competencies are expected to shape leadership styles that support sustained growth in church membership (Nyakundi & Ayako, 2020).

Enhancing interpersonal and personal competencies has a significant impact on theological education graduates, as practical verbal and nonverbal communication skills enable them to engage productively with diverse audiences in church ministry, educational settings, and other professional contexts (Watt, 2014). In ecclesiastical and academic settings, collaboration and teamwork are often necessary to achieve common goals.

Interpersonal competencies, including collaboration, attentive listening, and perspective-taking, are widely recognised as essential for effective teamwork

and social functioning in educational and professional contexts (Klinkosz et al., 2021; Ainiyah et al., 2022). Although theological traditions emphasise relational virtues such as love, forgiveness, and justice, empirical evidence on how these competencies shape theology graduates' effectiveness in community engagement, relational ministry, and conflict mediation remains limited. While studies on intercultural theological competence suggest that empathy and openness foster community building and mutual growth (Lourdunathan, 2022), targeted empirical research on interpersonal competencies among theology graduates is still underexplored and warrants further investigation.

Theological education encompasses not only theological knowledge but also character formation grounded in Christian values. Personal competencies such as integrity, loyalty, humility, and responsibility are highly valued in theological contexts and contribute to graduates' effectiveness as leaders in church and community service. Increasing personal competencies, such as self-discipline, fortitude, and self-reflection, allows graduates to develop personally and become leaders who perform well in church service (O'Leary & Johnson, 2017). This, in turn, enhances the quality of their service and their societal impact.

Personal competencies in theological education help graduates develop attitudes and behaviours that reflect love, respect, and concern for others. These competencies include the ability to listen with empathy, to provide pastoral, moral, and spiritual support, and to understand and respond to the needs of others with compassion and discernment. Effective engagement in pastoral and community ministry requires a high level of adaptability and flexibility in addressing diverse contexts and situations (Cadge et al., 2020; Nell, 2020). Increased personal competencies, such as openness to change, resilience, and stress management, help graduates better face challenges and complex situations.

This research aimed to understand the roles of interpersonal and personal competence in the performance of theological college graduates. Various previous studies have measured the influence of interpersonal competence and personal competence on the academic performance of college students (Poropat, 2009; Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012). This study examines the influence of interpersonal and personal competencies on alum performance after graduation as these competencies are applied in their workplaces. Rather than measuring this influence directly, the study analyses it through intervening variables that represent alums's technical skills.

Addressing a gap in the literature, this research focuses on alums of higher theological education institutions that adopt a holistic educational approach integrating theology with practical life competencies. Whereas prior studies have primarily emphasised theological knowledge or ministerial formation in isolation, limited attention has been given to how graduates apply interdisciplinary training in real-world contexts. This study contributes by exploring how theological education integrating theology, agriculture, and environmental conservation shapes alum perspectives, professional practices, and community engagement, with implications for the formulation of religion-based higher education policies.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Model

The model applied in this research was based on the PLS-SEM model (Sarstedt, Ringle, & Hair, 2021). The research model comprises two submodels: measurement and structural. The measurement submodel specifies the relationships between latent variables and their observable indicators (manifest variables), which were collected through structured questionnaire-based interviews. Each manifest variable was operationalised using statement items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The complete set of measurement items used to construct the latent variables is provided in Appendix 1.

Manifest variables serve as observable indicators of latent constructs, which are abstract variables inferred from measured data. The structural submodel examines the relationships among latent variables, represented by path coefficients indicating the strength and direction of their effects. This study employs 26 indicators to operationalise six latent variables, with their groupings detailed in Appendix 2. Interpersonal and personal competencies are hypothesised to indirectly influence theological college alums's performance through intervening variables: planning ability, task execution, and problem-solving capacity in the workplace.

In PLS-SEM, the structural submodel is used to test hypotheses concerning relationships among latent variables by estimating path coefficients and their statistical significance. This study formulated an alternative hypothesis (H1) proposing that interpersonal and personal competencies influence planning ability, problem-solving capacity, and task execution, which, in turn, affect alum performance. These hypothesised relationships, together with the associated manifest variables, are represented in the path model shown in Figure 1.

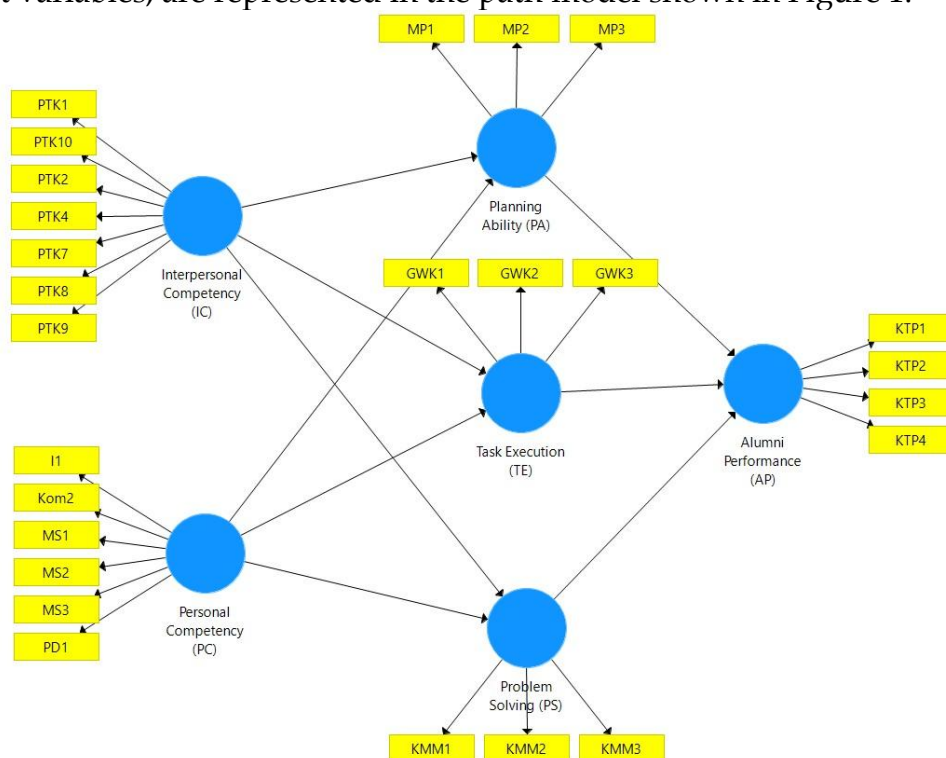


Figure 1. Research Model

Data Analysis Method

The researchers chose a particular theological college for their investigation because several factors aligned with their objective. These factors include: (a) The theological college chosen in this research has a holistic educational approach, namely not only teaching theology, but also agricultural, animal husbandry and agribusiness sciences, and sciences that link environmental aspects with theology; (b) This theological college provides dormitories for all students studying and also housing for the majority of its teaching staff; and (c) This college also has collaborations with various church institutions and non-governmental organizations where students carry out field practice in their final year. The theological college chosen for this research is located in the Regency of Cianjur, Indonesia.

This study used primary data collected through structured, questionnaire-based interviews with employed theological college alums identified from institutional and alums association records. From 259 eligible graduates, 77 respondents were selected using simple random sampling. This sample size exceeds the minimum requirement for PLS-SEM, which recommends at least ten times the maximum number of structural paths directed at any construct, thereby ensuring adequate statistical power.

An ethical statement in the questionnaire informed participants of the study's purpose, data use, confidentiality, and their right to decline participation or to omit responses without consequences, ensuring voluntary, ethically compliant participation. Model estimation employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) following Chin's (2010) procedures, using Smart-PLS to estimate the research model until convergence iteratively. The analysis included evaluating path coefficients, factor loadings, R^2 values, construct validity and reliability, discriminant validity, and overall model quality indicators (e.g., VIF and t-statistics), followed by path analysis to assess the strength and significance of relationships among latent variables. PLS-SEM was selected for its suitability for small samples, non-normal data, and predictive-oriented research with complex models, despite its relative limitation in estimating measurement error compared to covariance-based SEM.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Respondent Description

The number of male respondents in this study was 43, representing 56% of the total sample. The youngest respondent was 23, while the oldest was 39. The majority of respondents, 75 per cent of the total, were 30 years old or younger. This demographic composition suggests that younger theological college alums are more active in maintaining communication and social relationships with fellow alums, which likely increased their inclusion in the sampling frame. The predominance of younger respondents is expected to contribute to greater diversity in perceptions and responses to the questionnaire items, as younger individuals often exhibit more dynamic perspectives and greater variability in their views.

Table 1. Distribution of institutions where respondents work (in percentage)			
Work Institution	Male	Female	Total
Mission Foundation	20	14	34
Education Institution	8	14	22
Church	23	10	33
Orphanage	1	6	7
Other	4	0	4
Total	56	44	100

Most respondents, graduates of theological colleges, are employed in mission foundations, church institutions, or church-affiliated educational organisations, with mission foundations representing the largest sector. These institutions are predominantly non-profit and service-oriented, operating under church management or interchurch collaboration (Table 1). This employment profile highlights alumni's strong orientation toward public service and church-related ministries. It offers important implications for aligning theological education curricula with the practical needs of organisations that commonly employ their graduates.

Evaluation of Outer Model

In PLS-SEM, the outer model represents the measurement submodel, whose validity and reliability are essential for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of the structural (inner) model. Its evaluation examines the relationships between manifest variables and latent constructs, assessing how effectively each indicator reflects its intended construct. Accordingly, factor loadings are first evaluated to determine the extent to which the latent variable explains each manifest variable. A minimum loading factor value greater than 0.7 could be the limit for the suitability of manifest variables in constructing latent variables. Based on the research model's estimation results, all manifest variables used to measure each latent variable have loadings above 0.8, so no manifest variables were removed from the model.

In PLS-SEM, establishing construct reliability and validity is essential to ensuring robustness of the measurement model. The estimation results indicate that the outer model demonstrates adequate reliability and validity, with Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) exceeding recommended thresholds. The measurement evaluation results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of the reliability and validity of latent variables tests in the research model

Latent Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE
Alumni Performance (AP)	0.971	0.971	0.978	0.919
Interpersonal Competency (IC)	0.956	0.957	0.964	0.791
Personal Competency (PC)	0.954	0.955	0.963	0.814
Planning Ability (PA)	0.971	0.972	0.981	0.945
Problem Solving (PS)	0.942	0.942	0.963	0.897
Task Execution (TE)	0.926	0.926	0.953	0.871

Cronbach's alpha and rho_A assess internal consistency reliability, indicating the degree of correlation among indicators within a construct. Composite reliability assesses the proportion of true-score variance relative to measurement error, while average variance extracted (AVE) estimates the extent to which indicators capture construct variance. As shown in Table 2, values exceeding 0.7 for Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, composite reliability, and AVE confirm adequate construct reliability and convergent validity in the research model.

After establishing construct reliability and validity, discriminant validity was assessed to ensure that the model's constructs are conceptually distinct. The analysis examined whether each indicator loaded more strongly on its designated construct than on others, thereby confirming minimal construct overlap. The results show that all indicators met this criterion, supporting the conclusion that each construct represents a distinct conceptual dimension.

Evaluation Results and Discussion of Inner Model

The inner model analysis evaluates the strength and significance of relationships among constructs and the overall structural model fit. The estimation results indicate a high goodness-of-fit, with coefficients of determination (R^2) indicating that the independent variables explain the dependent variables well. The R^2 and adjusted R^2 values for each dependent construct are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Value of the coefficient of determination for each latent variable which acts as the dependent variable in the model.

Dependent Variable	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Alumni Performance (AP)	0.902	0.898
Planning Ability (PA)	0.854	0.850
Problem Solving (PS)	0.882	0.879
Task Execution (TE)	0.713	0.705

Variance in alum performance is primarily explained by planning ability, problem-solving skill, and task execution skill ($R^2 = 0.902$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.898$). Among the endogenous constructs, task execution skill shows the lowest explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.713$), indicating that interpersonal and personal competencies account for 71.3% of its variance. According to Hair et al. (2011), a coefficient of determination (R^2) between 0.50 and 0.75 was considered moderate, and values above 0.75 were substantial. An R^2 above 0.68 could be categorised as substantial.

Another key indicator of inner model fit is the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR). The model yielded SRMR values of 0.042 for the saturated model and 0.044 for the estimated model. While the saturated model reflects correlations among all latent variables, the estimated model incorporates the structural relationships, making it a more stringent measure of overall model fit. The SRMR value obtained from the estimated model was far below the maximum acceptable value, namely smaller than 0.010 or 0.08 for a more conservative value. Based on the SRMR value, the research model was free of misspecification.

To assess potential multicollinearity among latent variables, variance inflation factor (VIF) values in the inner model were examined; higher VIF values indicate greater collinearity among constructs. The VIF should not exceed 10. The research model's estimation results showed that none of the VIF values exceeded 10. However, if we apply the more conservative suggestion, namely that the VIF be lower than 5, the VIF values in this study slightly exceeded this threshold.

The primary output of PLS-SEM analysis is the path coefficient, which indicates the strength and direction of relationships among latent variables in the structural model. These standardised coefficients are central to hypothesis testing and theoretical evaluation and are interpreted similarly to regression coefficients. The path coefficients estimated from the research model are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of estimated research model path coefficients (in Figure 1)

Path in Research Model	Path Coefficient	Standard Deviation	T-stat	P-value
IC -> PA	0.382	0.105	3.641	0.000
IC -> PS	0.380	0.113	3.361	0.000
IC -> TE	0.350	0.156	2.238	0.026
PC -> PA	0.563	0.106	5.285	0.000
PC -> PS	0.581	0.110	5.279	0.000
PC -> TE	0.514	0.141	3.637	0.000
PA -> AP	0.361	0.086	4.181	0.000
PS -> AP	0.096	0.086	1.120	0.263
TE -> AP	0.541	0.068	7.970	0.000

In the inner model, each structural path represents a research hypothesis, with confirmation determined by the magnitude and significance of the path coefficients. As shown in Table 4, all paths exhibit significant positive coefficients exceeding 0.1, except for the path from problem-solving ability to alum performance, which is non-significant ($p > 0.05$) with a coefficient below 0.1. Accordingly, all hypotheses were supported except the proposed effect of problem-solving ability on alum performance.

The findings indicate that personal competency exerts a more decisive influence than interpersonal competency on alums's planning, problem-solving, and task execution abilities, as reflected by higher path coefficients. However, problem-solving ability does not significantly affect alum performance ($PS \rightarrow AP < 0.1$; $p > 0.05$), suggesting that theological colleges should further strengthen students' problem-solving preparation for workplace contexts.

Discussion

The respondents' demographic profile provides important context for interpreting the findings within a servant-leadership framework. Predominantly young theological college alums employed in mission, church, and educational settings, they reflect a generation inclined toward relational, service-oriented leadership values. This profile aligns closely with servant leadership principles – such as humility, empathy, and stewardship – thereby strengthening the contextual validity of analysing alum competencies and performance from this perspective (Do, 2025; Thakadipuram, 2024; Postuła, 2024).

The strong reliability and validity of the measurement model, indicated by factor loadings above 0.8 and composite reliability and AVE exceeding recommended thresholds, confirm that the constructs are well defined and consistent. Within a servant leadership framework, this robustness demonstrates that interpersonal and personal competencies are measurable attributes linked to leadership practice, as reflected in planning, problem-solving, and task execution (Némethová et al., 2025; Yorulmaz et al., 2025). The inner model further shows that these competencies substantially explain alum performance ($R^2 = 0.902$), indicating that servant leadership qualities embodied in personal and interpersonal competencies effectively translate into measurable performance outcomes in ministry contexts.

Notably, the non-significant effect of problem-solving ability on alum performance highlights an important nuance. From a servant leadership perspective, this suggests that technical or cognitive problem-solving skills alone do not determine leadership effectiveness; greater emphasis is placed on relational sensitivity, listening, and empowerment (Cherid, 2025). Consequently, alums who prioritise collaborative engagement and service may perform more effectively in ministry contexts that value collective outcomes, which explains the insignificant path between problem-solving and performance alongside the strong effects of planning and task execution. The more substantial influence of personal competency relative to interpersonal competency underscores that servant leadership is grounded in personal transformation. Internalised values, self-discipline, integrity, and emotional maturity form the foundation of effective service, suggesting that theological education should prioritise cultivating internal virtues alongside interpersonal skills to foster authentic, resilient leaders.

Practically, these findings highlight the need to integrate servant leadership principles into theological curricula, as the alignment between graduates' ministry contexts and performance-related competencies affirms servant leadership as a practical framework for effective ministry leadership. Emphasising personal competency development through spiritual formation, self-leadership, and reflective practices can enhance graduates' readiness for complex organisational contexts (Matahela, 2025). Overall, the study shows that servant leadership is most effective when grounded in strong personal competencies, with the model's high explanatory power confirming its measurable and practical impact. At the same time, the non-significant role of problem-solving underscores the greater importance of authenticity, planning, and consistent service execution.

CONCLUSION

This study offers important insights into the manifestation of servant leadership in the competencies and performance of theological college alums. The findings reveal that personal competency – encompassing self-awareness, integrity, and emotional maturity – exerts a more substantial influence on performance than interpersonal competency, challenging the assumption that interpersonal skills are the primary drivers of servant leadership effectiveness. The results underscore personal transformation as the foundation of authentic service and suggest that servant leadership success is more dependent on moral

character, planning, and consistent execution than on analytical problem-solving.

The study's strength lies in its empirical validation of servant leadership through rigorous PLS-SEM modelling, demonstrating strong construct reliability and validity within higher education and ministry contexts. By integrating servant leadership with quantitative performance modelling, the research advances the understanding of how internal competencies translate into leadership outcomes and offers practical implications for theological institutions, emphasising holistic – particularly personal – competency development in curriculum Design. However, the study is limited by a relatively homogeneous sample, mainly consisting of young alums serving in church- or mission-based contexts. Future research should aim to include more diverse organisational and cultural settings, employ longitudinal designs to explore the development and sustainability of leadership competencies, and integrate qualitative approaches to deepen the understanding of how servant leadership values are internalised and practised.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1. List of indicators or manifest variables used to construct latent variables in the research model

Manifest Variables	Manifest Variables
PTK1 – always motivating	MP1 – able to plan coordinated activities and programs with a long-term perspective
PTK2 – support coworkers	MP2 – able to prepare work plans that are clear, logical, and connected to all work teams
PTK4 – know the aspirations of colleagues	MP3 – able to convey the plans made to all involved
PTK7 – maintain good habits	GWK1 – able to work without supervision
PTK8 – make improvements to the organization	GWK2 – give priority to teamwork
PTK9 – learn from conflicts or differences of opinion that have occurred	GWK3 – able to sort out work that makes a major contribution to achieving the organization's strategic goals
PTK10 – pay attention to the work environment	KMM1 – Able to anticipate and overcome obstacles by identifying problems correctly
I1 – consistent behavior that earns the trust of others	KMM2 – able to define problems and find appropriate solution
Kom2 – able to communicate and debate without causing conflict	KMM3 – take responsibility for decisions and actions taken
MS1 – able to cope with job demands	KTP1 – complete work according to specified standards
MS2 – have good self-control	KTP2 – complete the work within the given time target
MP3 – have humility	KTP3 – get work done faster than others in the work environment do
PD1 – Able to maintain focus on service goals	KTP4 – complete the job thoroughly

Appendix 2. Latent variables and manifest variables employed in this research and their reference sources

Latent Variable	Description	Manifest Variables	References
Interpersonal Competency (IC)	Includes the ability to interact and communicate with other people, as well as the ability to build good working relationships.	PTK1, PTK2, PTK4, PTK7, PTK8, PTK9, PTK10.	Leonard et al. (2023); Konrad et al. (2021); Rego et al. (2021); Ibourk, A., & El Aynaoui (2023).
Personal Competency (PC)	Includes personal characteristics such as self-awareness, motivation, and resilience, as well as the ability to self-manage and overcome challenges.	I1, Kom2, MS1, MS2, MS3, PD1.	Bakhru (2017); Capella-Peris et al. (2021); Škrinjarić (2022).
Planning Ability (PA)	Reflects the alumni's ability to plan their actions well and effectively.	MP1, MP2, MP3.	Chuvgunova and Kostromina (2016).
Task Execution (TE)	Reflects the alumni's ability to complete their assignments according to the set deadlines.	GWK1, GWK2, GWK3.	Alrawashdi et al. (2014).
Problem Solving (PS)	Reflects the alumni's ability to identify, analyze and solve problems well.	KMM1, KMM2, KMM3.	Açıkgöz et al. (2022); Keleş (2022); Chen and Chang (2021).
Alumni Performance (AP)	Reflects the achievements and accomplishments of alumni in the context of their work or dedication in church and/or community service.	KTP1, KTP2, KTP3, KTP4	Casanova and Paguia (2022); Gomes et al. (2023); Latoja et al. (2022); Benitez et al. (2024).