

SUSTAINING *TA'AWUN* DRIVEN STRATEGIC COOPERATION THROUGH *TAKMIL WAL ISTIKMAL* AMONG ISLAMIC PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability is crucial in recent years to maintain and sustain competitiveness in any organisation. For profit or not for profit organisations are included. This is critical for Islamic education sectors. There have been growing preferences among parents to send their children to Islamic Private Schools, particularly Islamic schools with integrated curriculum. This situation has motivated *ta'awun* driven strategic cooperation among Islamic Private Schools to share resources and professional development on win-win situation. This study aims to explore the influence of *takmil wal istikmal* (reciprocal perfecting) among Islamic Private Schools. This study uses personal interview with headmasters of Islamic Private Schools in Selangor. The results showed that *ta'awun* driven strategic cooperation and *takmil wal istikmal* occurs at minimal level in a few areas, namely sharing of curriculum development, exchange of examination papers, sharing of teaching training, and student development. The main reason for the minimal reciprocal perfecting collaboration is due to individual school governance preference. The informants suggest for formalization of the strategic cooperation through formal council or entity at the Ministry of Education through the private school department.

Kata Kunci : *Strategic Cooperation; Islamic Private Schools; Malaysia*

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is crucial in recent years to maintain and sustain competitiveness in any organisation. For-profit or not-for-profit organisations are included. This is critical for Islamic education sectors. Every organization has to compete regardless the size, nature, and orientation (Aydiner et al, 2019; Lopes et al, 2019; Lütge, 2019). In other words, profit, non-profit, educational, charity, and small organizations have to compete among them in winning the heart of the stakeholders on a sustainable basis (Lütge, 2019; Yaseen & ElRefae, 2019).

Likewise, Islamic private schools are not spared from the competition. These Islamic schools have to get some number of students for the enrolment for continuity purpose (Lütge, 2019; Lopes et al, 2019; Memon, 2011; Gurr, 2010). The Islamic private schools with profit-making orientation are charging higher fee. In return, these schools offer superior value.

Needless to say, private schools without profit-making motive also need to charge some fee for administration and continuity. When competition is fierce and yet the resources are expensive and scarce, schools have to cooperate among them for survival and business continuity (Hannah & Eisenhardt, 2018).

Islamic education is well received in Malaysia. Hamid (2018) argued that Islamic education is preferred in Malaysia. The key reasons for Islamic private education from preschool until high school due to the balanced and holistic approach into intellectual enhancement with hikmah (wisdom) (Hashim et al, 2014; Hussien et al, 2017), universal human values (Hussin & Tamuri, 2019), ethics (Munji, 2014), and character building (Muzakki, 2018; Stapa, 2001; Rusdiana, 2017; Tamuri, 2007).

The competition has been stiff in offering Islamic education by private schools. The establishment of the Islamic schools is not only by private enterprises, but also by non-governmental organizations and social enterprises (Kadir & Sarif, 2015; Muhammed, 2018). Nevertheless, the common objectives in educating with Islamic values have motivated private Islamic schools to leverage on higher impact by having strategic cooperation. Thus, this study aims to explore on strategic cooperation among Islamic private schools on *takmil wal istikmal* spirit.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This part discusses critically the epistemological aspect of the study, which is how the reality of *ta'awun*, strategic cooperation through *takmil wal istikmal* among Islamic private schools has been understood from theory and practice in previous studies. The epistemological analysis on key constructs and variables of the study allows for new contribution from this paper.

Ta'awun

Ta'awun is mutual cooperation driven by spirituality and religiosity essence in the teachings of Islam. It is religiosity due to the nature as Divine commandment of Allah for human to establish mutual cooperation into the business of goodness (*al-birr*) and integrity or piety (*al-taqwa*). Both outcomes are strategic to the natural disposition of human as servants (*'ibad al rahman*) and vicegerents (*khalifah al ard*) of Allah. It is spirituality aspect in *ta'awun* due to the nature of human with cognitive, affective and behavioral components. Theoretically, social exchange theory, stakeholder theory, theory of reasonable action, and resource-based view theory embedded in *ta'awun*.

Strategic cooperation

Strategic cooperation is phenomenal. Traditionally, enterprises and firms are competing on offering the best value to the customers and stakeholders (Aureli et al, 2019; Dias & Dutschke, 2019; O'Dwyer & Gilmore, 2018). From head to head competition, now the firms chose to collaborate with competitors through various means of strategic cooperation (Dias & Dutschke, 2019; O'Dwyer & Gilmore, 2018). Ultimately, firms have the fiduciary duty to the bottom line (Huda et al, 2019; Hussain, Rigoni & Oriij, 2018).

The arrangement with other firms to gain synergy for sustainability is in the integration mechanism of organization (Aureli et al, 2019; O'Dwyer & Gilmore, 2018; Huda et al, 2019). There are two types, vertical integration and horizontal integration (Kapetaniou & Lee, 2019; Steiss, 2019; Herger & McCorriston, 2016). Vertical integration refers to the enhancement of organizational capability to create, gain and maintain competitive advantage within the value chain of organizations (Loertscher & Riordan, 2019; Teece, 2019). There are two types, namely, backward integration and forward integration. Backward integration refers to the control or ownership of organization in the capability to supply raw materials. By doing so, organizations could enhance quality and integrity of production (Loertscher & Riordan, 2019; Teece, 2019; Huo et al, 2019). As for forward integration, it refers to the control or ownership of organization in the capability to sell the products directly to the customers (Loertscher & Riordan, 2019; Castañer & Ketokivi, 2018). By doing so, organizations could reduce cost of intermediaries and to get first hand feedback from the customers.

Strategic cooperation arrangement is in the horizontal integration. In this approach, organizations arrange with other organizations for areas that do not require their focus or adding value to the competitive advantage (Loertscher & Riordan, 2019; Teece, 2019). Strategic cooperation is applicable to any type of organization, whether for-profit, not-for-profit, government, charity, or education (Steiss, 2019; Teece, 2019; Castañer & Ketokivi, 2018). The main difference lies in the degree of bottom line (Huda et al, 2019; Hussain, Rigoni & Orij, 2018). The not-for-profit organizations still require to establish goals, set plan and formulate strategies to achieve the goals with efficiency and effectiveness.

Islamic Private Schools

Islamic education has been in the society for ages. It goes with the development education in Malaysia. The uniqueness of Islamic private schools lies in the value, specifically value for people. Value for people has been always the top priority when dealing with education. According to Ting & Lee (2009), besides close proximity to residential area, ethnicities, cultural and religious are equally important to stakeholders. Likewise, in the case of Islamic private schools, religiosity and spirituality are always top agenda.

There are two versions of school establishment; those are public and private schools. Karimizadeha & Abolghasemib (2016) contended that Islamic and religious education has been the attention in Malaysian schools, whether there are public or private schools. In fact, science subjects need explanation from religious explanation (Ramli et al, 2018). Nevertheless, Akar & Ustuner (2019) argued that capabilities of offering the value in Islamic education are always limited.

Islamic private schools are very dedicated to the value of education for people. In fact, quality of life is essential for the people. According to Soto & Rojas (2019), self-efficacy and job satisfaction contributes to quality of work life.

The quality of services at private school is paramount. The staff and teachers of private schools are more committed to provide value for people and money invested in the schools. The school environment is stimulating for superior performance. Cheng & Kadir (2018) pointed out the relationship between work environment and commitment of teachers towards the private schools. Lim & Bahauddin (2018) argued on the contextual aspects of the schools are essential to assure adequate ratio of teachers and students. As for Qin & Nor (2018), important issues of

private schools are related to providing high level of value for human, not just for students, but also for the stakeholders.

Educational focus of private schools is on value for human. Levin (2019) argued that private schools provide learning experience on people orientation instead of merely academic achievement. This aspect is greatly emphasized at Islamic private schools. In the meantime, stress levels of teachers need substantial attention from employers (Hashim & Kayode, 2010).

The orientation of training emphasizes on human value. According to Soto & Rojas (2019), teachers at Islamic private schools have been exposed to self-efficacy and job satisfaction. This is essential to enable teachers to add value in the deliverables of education (Ramli et al, 2018).

Takmil wal istikmal

Takmil derived from the word *kamil* (perfect), which means making it perfect. Technically, it refers to the nature of human as *Insan kamil* refers to the perfect nature of human creation. When *takmil* is in place, it is about making someone or something into perfection. Likewise, the process is in pair or reciprocal, *wa al-istikmal*, which means in reciprocal to make someone or something perfect. Thus, the process will be practiced as *takmil wal istikmal*, perfecting on something or someone in two ways or reciprocal (Santoso & Khoirudin, 2019; Mahmud, 2014; Farudi, 2017; Rusdiana, 2017).

In practice, the perfection in human enables them to perfect among them. Santoso & Khoirudin (2019) argued that the nature of *Insan Kamil* is educating human with philosophy of life. *Takmil wal Istikmal* is a process of reciprocal education and practice among people. The process is interactive (Saliba, 1973; Santoso & Khoirudin, 2018; Munji, 2014; Mahmud, 2014). Saliba's approach of *insan kamil* is in the *al-jabr wa'l muqabalah*, in which both are meeting with serious determination to achieve something on mutual basis.

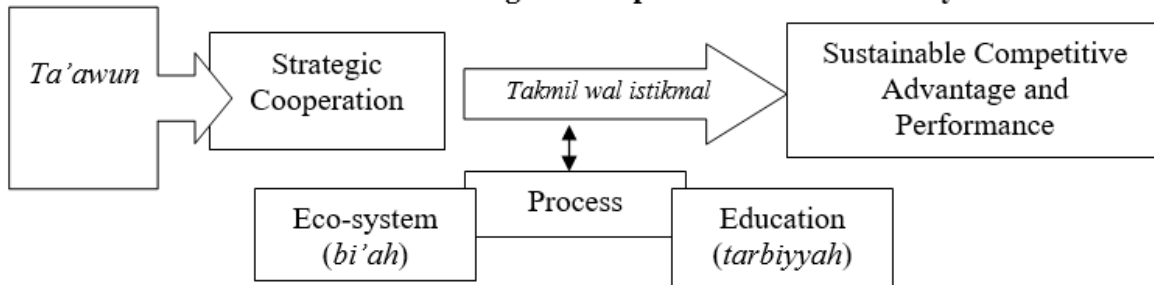
The nature of thinking and practice is driven by Tawhidic paradigm. The Tawhidic paradigm process emphasizes on fiduciary duty on human as servants and vicegerent of Allah. In the holistic manner, Munji (2014) argued that the manifesfation of Tawhidic approach in *takmil wal istikmal* is about being ethical in all aspects of life. In fact, Mahmud (2014) contended that *takmil wal istikmal* is in line with the nature of *insan kamil*. In the context of education, *takmil wal istikmal* is beyond merely educational process but the way to live in this world with responsibility. Practical experience is more apparent in Islamic education (Yusoff et al, 2018).

Philosophy of *takmil wal istikmal* is perpetual. Farudi (2017) contended spirituality enhancement (*ruhiyyah takmiliyyah*) as the essential element in the process of *takmil wal istikmal*. Indeed, Rusdiana (2017) emphasizes that character building of *insan kamil* is apparent on practice ('amal) instead of theoretical ('ilm wal hikmah). Muzakki (2018) emphasizes on intellectual aspect of *insan kamil* to perfect both physical and spiritual.

Value for human is always the main objective in Islam. This is particularly the role of human as servants and vicegerents of Allah. The focal value of human is in the spiritual dimension (*al-ruhhiyy al-insaniyyah*). Asmaya (2018) argues that *takmil wal istikmal* is related to spiritual dimension of human. This has been the central theme of Islamic education in Malaysia (Hamid, 2018). In fact, Hussin & Tamuri (2019) argued that value of human has been focal and vocal in teaching Islamic education. As for Stapa (2001), the value of human as *insan kamil* is action oriented instead of rhetorical. As a result, it is natural for human to search and enhance perfection in life (Asmaya, 2018; Ayub et al, 2017).

Takmil wal istikmal is participative and inclusive process. Parents' involvement is apparent (Gurr, 2010). Character building on *akhlaq* (Halim Tamuri, 2007; Hamid, 2018). Hashim, Hussien & Juperi (2014) emphasizes on *hikmah* (wisdom) of Islamic education. Likewise, in perfecting the education (Hashim, Hussein & Imran, 2014). Education for all (Hussien, Hashim & Mokhtar, 2017). Teachers are stressful but manageable (Hashim & Kayode, 2010). Values embedded in the process (Muzakki, 2018; Husin & Tamuri, 2019).

Figure 1: Research Framework for Ta'awun driven strategic cooperation through *takmil wal istikmal* among Islamic private schools in Malaysia



METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative to understand the reality or context with detail instead of testing the effect of *takmil wal istikmal*. Qualitative research allows for interpretation of the reality. It is practical and rich of contextual understanding (Silverman, 2006; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Liamputtong, 2019).

As for the research questions include “What are the factors for strategic cooperation among Islamic private schools?”, “What kinds of strategic cooperation among Islamic private schools?”, “How did Islamic private schools initiate and manage strategic cooperation?”, and “In what ways Islamic private schools work on reciprocal strategic cooperation?”.

Qualitative research adheres to ethical requirements. The ethics in research is essential to ensure the credibility, reliability and validity aspects (Welland & Pugsley, 2019). Therefore, in every qualitative research must adhere to process and protocol (Mason, 2017).

The interview questions are based on the research questions. Before conducting the pilot study, the study consulted two experts in education to validate the interview questions together with the interview protocol. The main comments from the experts are mainly in the language, particularly to have lead questions and to avoid the use of jargons in the interview. The use of English in the interview questions is commendable due to the background of headmasters of schools.

The study used note taking approach in the interview session that held between October 2018 until December 2019. Each interview session took between 20 to 30 minutes. After the interview, the researchers transcribed the note into interview transcripts. The interview transcripts were sent to the interviewees for verification. In addition, the study also approached two independent researchers who are familiar with qualitative research to validate the feedback of the informants. In both verification and validation process enables the interview results to gain more credibility in terms of reliability and validity.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study. The findings is based on the personal interview of semi-structured with 8 headmasters of Islamic private schools in Selangor to answer the objectives of the study with key questions namely “What are the factors for strategic cooperation among Islamic private schools?”, “What kinds of strategic cooperation among Islamic private schools?”, “How did Islamic private schools initiate and manage strategic cooperation?”, and “In what ways Islamic private schools work on reciprocal strategic cooperation?”

The respondents have held headmaster position for more than 5 years while the schools in the study have been providing Islamic private school services for more than 10 years. According to Kadir & Sarif (2015), it is very challenging for Islamic private schools to sustain for more than 5 years especially in Klang Valley due to fierce competition among companies, NGOs and institutions that established Islamic private schools in Malaysia. In fact, Hussin & Tamuri (2019) argued that the value proposition of Islamic private schools is not merely offering Islamic education, but the value for people that imbued with Islamic education is expected by parents and the stakeholders. As for Ibrahim et al (2015), the value for people is not rhetoric, but practical, particularly in the high-density populated areas with many social issues such as in Klang Valley. In terms of location coverage is comprehensive. It is very essential to get respondents from locations that represent the demographic of Malaysia, which is in Klang Valley (Hussin & Tamuri, 2019; Kadir & Sarif, 2015). Table 1 summarises the profile of the respondents and the schools that they represented.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents and Islamic Private Schools

| Code | Administrative Experience of Respondents in No of Years | Levels of Education Provided | No of Years of Establishment | Locality/District | No of students |
|------|---|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| HM 1 | 9 | Pre-school, Primary and Secondary | 20 | Gombak | 300 |
| HM 2 | 10 | Primary and Secondary | 18 | Kelang | 400 |
| HM 3 | 5 | Primary and Secondary | 11 | Hulu Langat | 250 |
| HM 4 | 7 | Primary and Secondary | 15 | Rawang | 350 |
| HM 5 | 7 | Primary | 17 | Shah Alam | 150 |
| HM 6 | 5 | Primary | 10 | Puchong | 150 |
| HM 7 | 8 | Primary and Secondary | 13 | Petaling Jaya | 300 |
| HM 8 | 7 | Primary | 11 | Ampang | 80 |

There are various factors for the need of strategic cooperation among Islamic private schools. According to HM 1, it is natural for schools, not just private schools to establish strategic collaboration among schools. As for HM 1, survival for continuity in giving educational services,

enhancement of educational contents and services are the factors for strategic collaboration among Islamic private schools. HM 1 said:

“We have to collaborate with our counterparts to add value to our educational outcomes. There should be contemporary educational outcomes with Islamic educational input. This is the reality of our society. We cannot do things isolated from the reality. Otherwise, people will not be sending their children to our school. Our survival in running private school like us is in depending on the number of students. If have less students, we will have difficulties to meet our financial obligation. Another reason for us to collaborate with other Islamic private schools and also other schools is to share facilities and exchange of information on administration and educational matters. Moreover, as Islamic schools, we are supposed to practice collaboration or ‘amal jama’ie.”

In certain situation, the driver for strategic collaboration is triggered by parent organizations. In the context of HM 2, its parent organization has been emphasizing on the need for strategic collaboration to extend services to the stakeholders beyond teaching business at schools. HM 2 pointed out:

“In any collaboration, it is always about sharing and gaining good things. It has to be mutual and reciprocal. In fact, our school is owned by a national level NGO. Collaboration with other NGOs and establishments is natural to us. We have beyond just provide education to our community. This is one of the avenues of our NGO. I myself a member of this NGO. In fact, most of our staff are members of the NGO. Majority of our students are also children of the members of this NGO. In the meantime, our members also encouraged others to send their children to our schools.”

Islamic private schools require supports from the stakeholders. Even though the schools require monthly fee, full supports from the community still essential for the continuity and survival. These have been the drivers for HM 3 to survive until now. HM 3 said:

“We cannot operating school without the support of the stakeholders. Even though this is Islamic private school, but it is actually for the community. The residential association owned this school. This is part of the service to the Muslim community. This is particularly for this school when it is owned by the community. Even though some community members are not Muslims, they have been supportive of our presence. In community activities, we have been participating actively. Likewise, when we organized school activities, the community has been there with us. Our community leaders and our members of parliament are always with us.”

Schools are part of the society whether private or public schools. By default, schools and society are just like siblings in a big family. HM 4 said

“We are just a big family. Private school is the little brother and public schools are our elder brothers and sisters. Our parents are the members of the society. By that nature, we are just in one big family. We have been practicing big family relationship. Our cooperation between neighboring schools is in the area of teaching and learning. We exchanged notes, examination questions, and methods of teaching. You have to make your teaching and learning in Islamic education an interesting one to retain the children. We met after school time on weekdays and sometimes on weekends.”

Neighborhood spirit has been the driver for HM5's school to provide education services to the community for many years. In neighborhood spirit, love and care, sharing happiness, and sharing and caring have been the spirit of the society. HM 5 mentioned:

"Helping each other on common objectives and goodness is welcomed at our school. It is on reciprocal basis. It is always two ways. If just one way, there will be disheartening on the other side. We have been sharing facilities with other Islamic private schools near to us. We have playground, enough to conduct physical education. Yet our neighboring schools have no playground or football fields."

Private schools are also under the purview of the government at federal as well as at state levels. For Islamic private schools, the Islamic Council also has a role in assuring the quality of Islamic education. HM 6 argued

"For me, private schools and public schools are in the hands of the government. Both the Federal as well as state levels has duty to safeguard us. The only difference is the 'birth certificate' for us as private schools. For us as Islamic private schools, both Islamic Education Unit of Ministry of Education as well as State Islamic Council conducted regular inspection on us. However, we are wondering, why we are not given similar facilities like the public schools. If public schools have a common place for them to meet like Pusat Kegiatan Guru (PKG), we do not have one because we are private schools. That's cannot be the reason. In our case, we have to survive with anything we have. For that reason, we have to talk to our counterparts Islamic schools in our area. We often meet to discuss about many things related to school administration and examination."

The role of community is very important to make Islamic private schools relevant and sustainable. HM 7 said:

"Our Parents and Teachers Associations (PTA) play very important role in uniting all Islamic private schools in our area. They often met to discuss about greater roles of PTAs and schools collectively. Some of us are not purely profit-oriented, just to give service to the community. Our schools are in the neighborhood. Easy for parents to send their children and also, they are in the safe hands. Even though there are many public schools in our area, but there are located at the busy main streets. For small children would be unsafe. Moreover, some parents could not fetch their children. Our school provides both academic and practical of Islamic teaching. It is like the public schools' Kafa class. We provide lunch too to our students and staff."

Value for people has been always the priority especially in educational sector. The nature of Islamic private school is not the reason to neglect the value for people. HM 8 said:

"In private school, everything is about money. Yes, we need money to meet our financial obligations to pay rental, utilities, salary and maintenance. But, not everything is about money. Some parents insisted the value for money that they invested in their children. But, we have to explain to them that value for people is the primary objective of educational sector. Whether we are operating our schools as private or public, it is not the matter. Public schools organize quizzes, competitions, debates, and all kinds of activities under the purview of the district education office. As for us, we don't have a body to organize such activities for our students. Therefore, we collaborated among us in collaboration with NGOs and

community nearby. It is very good experience when our students could mingle with students of Islamic private schools in our area.”

The preliminary results showed that a few elements of *ta'awun* force in *takmil wal istikmal* occurs at minimal level in a few areas, namely sharing of curriculum development, exchange of examination papers, sharing of teaching training, and student development. The main reason for the minimal reciprocal perfecting collaboration is due to individual school governance preference. The informants suggest for formalization of the strategic cooperation through formal council or entity at the Ministry of Education through the private school department.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study showed that *ta'awun* driven strategic cooperation has been done for survival for continuity in giving educational services, enhancement of educational contents and services, to extend services to the stakeholders beyond teaching business, to engage value from the community for continuity and survival, to make the spirit of a big family alive, to widespread neighborhood spirit, love and care, sharing and caring, to assure the quality of education, to be relevant and sustainable and to add value for people. Lütge (2019) argued that competition for best value of people in the education requires mutual strategic cooperation in reciprocal manners.

In fact, Kadir & Sarif (2015) contended that sustainability is not singular, silo and isolated, but plural, extensive networking and widespread worldwide. Hamid (2018) pointed that the expectation on value for people has been explicitly mentioned in the national philosophy of education in Malaysia. Nevertheless, due to competition in the education has turned education into trade commodity (Aureli et al, 2019; Lim & Bahauddin, 2018; Kadir & Sarif, 2015).

The study has focused on three areas, namely factors for strategic cooperation, nature of strategic cooperation, and the degree of mutual strategic cooperation vis-à-vis *takmil wal istikmal*. The ultimate concern for strategic cooperation is within survival and continuity the Islamic private schools. The concern has been translated into practice when the schools in the study already established for more than 10 years (Hussin & Tamuri, 2019; Kadir & Sarif, 2015).

In the factors for strategic cooperation, the main factors are for survival and continuity of the business in private school education, specifically Islamic education. The respondents argued that survival for continuity is to give value added educational services, enhancement of educational contents and services. In doing so, they sought full supports from the community to make them relevant and sustainable while emphasis on giving value for people. The reasons given are valid and essential for these Islamic private schools to remain in the society as change agents particularly in the Islamic education (Aureli et al, 2019; Karimizadeha & Abolghasemib, 2016; Kadir & Sarif, 2015).

The nature of strategic cooperation is varied that can be classified as short, medium and long terms. These Islamic private schools were using these methods to extend services to the stakeholders beyond teaching business, assuring the quality of Islamic education, and to add value for people. According to Aureli et al (2019), knowledge intensive organizations such as Islamic private schools, have to establish goals, set up plans and formulate strategies in various terms in order to meet the objectives of the organizations. In the context of Islamic private schools, these schools must align the school planning with short, medium and long term plans of the Ministry of Education Malaysia and the Islamic Council (Hamid, 2018; Huda et al, 2019; Lim & Bahauddin, 2018).

In terms of the degree of *ta'awun* driven strategic cooperation through *takmil wal istikmal*, the strategic collaboration has been implemented in various models like family members, like members of society, beyond the business as usual. According to the respondents, *takmil wal istikmal* or mutual cooperation between schools and society is resembled like a sibling in a big family is really phenomenal. This is supposed to be usual for human society. However, the commoditization of education has turned it to be something unusual concerning human society (Akar & Ustuner, 2019; Yusoff et al, 2018; Kadir & Sarif, 2015). Likewise, when *takmil wal istikmal* is concerning mutual help like the neighborhood spirit, essence of love and care, sharing happiness, and sharing and caring have been the spirit of the society.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *ta'awun* driven strategic cooperation through *takmil wal istikmal* among Islamic private schools has been phenomenal in the competitive education business. When education is regarded as business commodity, the direct stakeholders will expect high return on investment. The spirit of elevating human society into caring society has not been the top priority. Nevertheless, in this study has proven contextually, *takmil wal istikmal* or reciprocal cooperation has been extended beyond business survival but for the added value of human civilization.

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