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Communication Strategy for the Development of Study Program Organizers Outside the Main Campus (PSDKU) of the University of North Sumatra in Supporting the Sustainability of State Higher Education in North Nias Regency

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ABSTRACT

The establishment of the Program Studi di Luar Kampus Utama (PSDKU) of Universitas Sumatera Utara in North Nias Regency represents an effort to expand higher education access in Indonesia's underdeveloped, frontier, and outermost (3T) regions. However, its sustainability faces challenges related to declining student enrollment, limited institutional capacity, infrastructure constraints, and decreasing public trust. This study aims to analyze the development communication strategy implemented to support the sustainability of PSDKU as a public higher education institution in North Nias Regency. This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design. Data were collected through observation, documentation, and in-depth interviews with university administrators, PSDKU coordinators, lecturers, education staff, students, alumni, parents, and community leaders. Data were analyzed through interactive qualitative analysis involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion verification with source triangulation. The findings show that PSDKU communication practices operate through institutional and operational communication coordinated by local management. However, communication remains predominantly top-down and technology-mediated, limiting stakeholder participation. Sustainability challenges are influenced by financial dependence, geographical barriers, limited human resource mobility, inadequate infrastructure, and negative perceptions of agricultural higher education. This study concludes that participatory development communication involving universities, local governments, schools, alumni, students, and communities is essential. The study contributes by emphasizing stakeholder-based communication, social marketing, and local potential-based institutional branding as strategies for sustaining higher education initiatives in 3T regions.

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Introduction

Higher education plays an important role in improving human resource quality and supporting regional development. However, equal access to higher education remains a challenge, particularly in underdeveloped, frontier, and outermost (3T) regions that experience geographical, economic, and infrastructure limitations. The establishment of Study Programs Outside the Main Campus (PSDKU) represents a strategic policy to expand access to higher education, improve educational relevance, and strengthen the contribution of universities to regional development (Pattimukay, 2024). Nevertheless, the sustainability of PSDKU depends not only on academic management and institutional capacity but also on the

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Vol. 5, No. 2, April 2026, pp. 1200-1209

ability of organizers to build communication, trust, and participation among stakeholders.

From the perspective of development communication, educational development requires more than the dissemination of institutional programs. Communication functions as a process of creating shared understanding, encouraging participation, and involving communities as active subjects of development. Development communication involves development actors, messages, communication channels, and target communities that interact within a social system (Lennie & Tacchi, 2013). Therefore, effective communication becomes an important factor in ensuring that higher education initiatives introduced in local communities can be accepted, supported, and sustained. This issue is relevant to the implementation of PSDKU Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU) in North Nias Regency. PSDKU USU was established through collaboration between Universitas Sumatera Utara and the Government of North Nias Regency, marked by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on April 26, 2021, and inaugurated on November 16, 2021. The Faculty of Agriculture USU serves as the parent faculty by managing the Agrotechnology and Aquatic Resources Management study programs. Although academic governance, curriculum, and quality standards remain under USU's main campus, PSDKU also carries a broader development mission through community service activities in agriculture, fisheries product processing, waste utilization, and micro-business assistance.

The establishment of PSDKU USU is particularly significant because North Nias Regency is located in the Nias Islands region, which is categorized as a disadvantaged area based on Presidential Regulation Number 63 of 2020. The region continues to face development challenges related to human resources, accessibility, infrastructure, and economic capacity. Data from the (Purba et al., 2026) indicates that Human Development Index achievements in the Nias Islands remain below the provincial average, with North Nias Regency among the regions with the lowest achievement. These conditions demonstrate the importance of expanding higher education access as part of long-term human resource development. Limited access to higher education has also contributed to educational migration, where students leave their home regions to pursue higher education elsewhere. Previous studies show that higher education institutions remain concentrated in urban areas, particularly Java and major cities in Sumatra (Welch & Aziz, 2021). This situation creates the risk of losing potential human resources from regions that need local capacity development. Therefore, the presence of state universities in disadvantaged regions is expected not only to increase educational opportunities but also to strengthen local human resources based on regional potential.

Despite these strategic objectives, the sustainability of PSDKU USU in North Nias still faces challenges. Since its establishment in 2021, student enrollment has not increased significantly, and several programs have experienced difficulties in attracting student interest. Although existing study programs have obtained "Good" accreditation and PSDKU graduated its first nine students in 2025, the continuation of the institution requires stronger community acceptance and stakeholder support. The extension of cooperation between the Government of North Nias Regency and USU in 2026 also provides an important opportunity to evaluate how communication strategies contribute to institutional sustainability. The sustainability challenges of PSDKU cannot be understood solely from institutional capacity, financial support, or academic management. They are also related to how organizers communicate the role and benefits of higher education to stakeholders. PSDKU represents an institutional innovation introduced into a local social system; therefore, its sustainability depends on the process of communication, adoption, and acceptance among government institutions, universities, schools, parents, students, alumni, and communities.

Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory explains that innovation adoption occurs through communication processes within a social system (Rogers, 2003). In this context, PSDKU requires communication strategies that move beyond information delivery toward dialogue, participation, empowerment, and collective ownership. This perspective is consistent with participatory development communication approaches. Freire emphasizes that development communication should promote equality, dialogue, awareness, and empowerment rather than

Amorti: Journal of Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies ISSN 2962-9209
Vol. 5, No. 2, April 2026, pp. 1200-1209

one-way communication (Vaughan, 2011). Similarly, the Communication for Development and Social Change paradigm highlights participation and stakeholder involvement as important elements in achieving sustainable social change (Lennie & Tacchi, 2013). These perspectives indicate that communication strategy is an essential component in strengthening the relationship between educational institutions and local communities.

Previous studies have examined the role of higher education in regional development, community empowerment, and human resource improvement. Research by (Brekke, 2021) highlights the contribution of universities to regional economic performance, while (Unger & Polt, 2021) emphasizes the role of universities in developing competencies and innovation. Other studies have discussed development communication as a mechanism for building shared understanding and collaborative action among stakeholders (Elia et al., 2020). However, these studies have not specifically examined how development communication strategies operate within PSDKU implementation, particularly in the context of state universities located in 3T regions. Therefore, this study addresses the research gap by examining PSDKU sustainability from a development communication perspective. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on the educational or institutional aspects of higher education development, this study analyzes how communication processes, stakeholder relationships, participation mechanisms, and communication barriers influence the sustainability of PSDKU. The novelty of this study lies in identifying development communication strategies that can strengthen collaboration between universities, local governments, and communities in sustaining higher education initiatives in disadvantaged regions. Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the development communication strategy implemented by PSDKU organizers of Universitas Sumatera Utara in supporting the sustainability of state higher education in North Nias Regency. Specifically, this study examines (1) the communication processes among stakeholders involved in PSDKU implementation, (2) communication barriers affecting institutional sustainability, and (3) development communication strategies required to strengthen stakeholder participation and public acceptance.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design within the constructivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2024). This approach was selected because the study aimed to understand the development communication strategies implemented by the organizers of the Study Program Outside the Main Campus (PSDKU) of Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU) in supporting the sustainability of state higher education in North Nias Regency. The case study approach enabled an in-depth exploration of communication processes, stakeholder interactions, and contextual challenges within the implementation of PSDKU. The research was conducted at two locations, namely Universitas Sumatera Utara's main campus in Medan and the PSDKU operational area in North Nias Regency. Data collection was conducted through observation, documentation review, and semi-structured in-depth interviews.

Informant Selection

Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement, knowledge, and experience related to PSDKU implementation. The criteria for selecting informants included: (1) individuals directly involved in PSDKU policy formulation and implementation, (2) stakeholders who experienced or were affected by PSDKU activities, and (3) individuals who were considered capable of providing relevant information regarding communication processes and institutional sustainability. Community stakeholders, including active students, alumni, parents of students, community leaders.

The selection of informants from different stakeholder groups was intended to obtain diverse perspectives regarding communication practices, institutional acceptance, and

ISSN 2962-9209 Amorti: Journal of Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies
Vol. 5, No. 2, April 2026, pp. 1200-1209

sustainability challenges. Data were collected through three methods (Creswell & Poth, 2020)

In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected informants to explore information related to communication processes between PSDKU organizers and stakeholders, communication channels used in promoting PSDKU, stakeholder participation, perceived barriers to PSDKU sustainability, strategies for strengthening institutional acceptance. The interview process was conducted flexibly to allow informants to explain their experiences and perspectives in depth.

Observation

Direct observations were conducted at PSDKU operational locations in North Nias Regency to examine institutional activities, interactions among stakeholders, learning environments, and communication practices occurring in the field.

Documentation Study

Document analysis was conducted by reviewing relevant institutional documents, including cooperation agreements, institutional reports, academic documents, accreditation documents, promotional materials, and other supporting documents related to PSDKU implementation.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative analysis model proposed by (Miles et al., 2024) consisting of three interconnected stages:

Data Condensation

Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were reviewed, selected, coded, and categorized based on emerging themes related to development communication strategies, stakeholder involvement, and sustainability challenges.

Data Display

The categorized data were organized into thematic matrices and narrative descriptions to identify patterns, relationships, and differences among stakeholder perspectives.

Conclusion Drawing and Verification

Conclusions were developed by interpreting patterns from the collected data and continuously verifying findings throughout the analysis process. The analysis integrated data from interviews, observations, and documentation to develop a comprehensive understanding of PSDKU communication practices. The comparison between different data sources allowed the researchers to identify consistent findings as well as differences among stakeholder perspectives.

Data Validity and Triangulation

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation and method triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from different groups of informants, including university administrators, PSDKU managers, lecturers, students, alumni, parents, and community leaders. Method triangulation was conducted by comparing findings from interviews with observation results and documentary evidence. Through this triangulation process, the study ensured that the findings represented a comprehensive and credible interpretation of development communication strategies in supporting the sustainability of PSDKU USU in North Nias Regency (Flick, 2022).

Results and Discussion

Results

The findings show that the implementation of PSDKU Universitas Sumatera Utara in North Nias Regency operates through two main communication patterns: institutional communication and operational communication. Institutional communication occurs between Universitas Sumatera Utara and the Government of North Nias Regency through formal mechanisms, including cooperation agreements, coordination meetings, administrative reporting, and evaluation activities. Documentary analysis shows that the Memorandum of

Amorti: Journal of Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies ISSN 2962-9209
Vol. 5, No. 2, April 2026, pp. 1200-1209

Understanding (MoU) and Cooperation Agreement provide the institutional basis for the division of responsibilities. Universitas Sumatera Utara is responsible for academic quality assurance, curriculum implementation, lecturer provision, and academic governance, while the local government provides support related to infrastructure, operational funding, and student tuition assistance. At the operational level, communication is mainly coordinated by the PSDKU Coordinator, who functions as the connecting actor between the main campus, local government, lecturers, students, and community stakeholders. Interviews indicate that the coordinator plays an important role in managing academic information, coordinating lecturer activities, handling student services, and communicating institutional needs to stakeholders.

However, observations indicate that communication patterns remain highly dependent on digital communication channels. Due to the geographical distance between Medan and North Nias, academic coordination is frequently conducted through online platforms such as Zoom meetings and messaging applications. While these communication channels support administrative continuity, they have not fully created intensive academic interaction between lecturers, students, and the local community. One lecturer stated *"Most coordination with Medan is carried out online because direct visits depend on travel schedules and available funding."*. Field observations also showed that campus activities were relatively limited, with academic interactions concentrated around scheduled learning activities. The limited frequency of lecturer presence contributed to the perception among some stakeholders that PSDKU had not yet developed a strong academic atmosphere. The findings identify several communication-related barriers affecting the sustainability of PSDKU. These barriers consist of institutional, geographical, financial, and sociocultural dimensions. Observation results indicate that PSDKU operates with limited supporting facilities. Learning activities are conducted in one main campus building with limited laboratory facilities, library resources, and academic support facilities. In addition, the campus location, which is approximately two kilometers from the main road and not supported by public transportation, creates accessibility challenges for students and lecturers. (a)The geographical distance between the main campus in Medan and PSDKU in North Nias also affects academic interaction. Most lecturers are based in Medan, causing teaching activities to depend on lecturer mobility and travel arrangements.

Document analysis shows that PSDKU implementation remains strongly dependent on financial support from the North Nias Regency Government. Local government funding supports operational activities, lecturer travel expenses, and student tuition subsidies. Interviews revealed that delays in budget disbursement affected several operational aspects, including academic administration and data management. Therefore, financial dependence became not only an economic issue but also influenced communication coordination between institutional actors. PSDKU administrator explained: *"Operational activities are closely related to local government support. When funding processes are delayed, several academic activities must also adjust."* The study found that public acceptance remains one of the main challenges for PSDKU sustainability. Although the institution was established to expand higher education access, community understanding of its role remains limited.

Interview findings indicate that declining student interest is not only related to economic factors but also influenced by social perceptions regarding agricultural education. Some community members consider agricultural programs less attractive compared with other professional fields such as civil service, education, or health sectors. Several informants stated

ISSN 2962-9209 Amorti: Journal of Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies
Vol. 5, No. 2, April 2026, pp. 1200-1209

that agricultural education is still associated with traditional farming rather than professional careers based on science, technology, and innovation. Furthermore, some stakeholders perceived PSDKU as similar to distance education because of the limited physical presence of lecturers on campus. This perception reduced public confidence regarding the quality of learning services. The decline in student interest was reflected in enrollment trends. The first admission period involved 63 students, while later recruitment periods experienced a decrease, with approximately ten applicants recorded in 2025. The first cohort graduated nine students in 2025. These findings indicate a gap between the institutional objective of expanding higher education access and the level of community acceptance of PSDKU.

These strategies emphasize increasing participation, improving public understanding, and strengthening institutional identity. The first proposed strategy is social marketing through collaboration with senior high schools and vocational schools in North Nias Regency. Informants considered this approach important because schools represent the closest communication channel to prospective students and families. The second strategy is increasing direct interaction between universities and communities through academic promotion activities, public lectures, and seminars involving university leaders and lecturers from the Faculty of Agriculture USU. These activities are expected to improve public understanding of agricultural education and strengthen institutional trust. The third strategy is strengthening local human resources through the development of permanent lecturers or academic personnel based in North Nias. Informants considered local academic resources important to create continuous academic interaction and strengthen the identity of PSDKU as a regional higher education institution. One community informant stated: "*People need to see lecturers and academic activities directly so they can believe that PSDKU is truly a university presence in North Nias.*"

Discussion

Communication Strategy for the Development of Study Program Organizers Outside the Main Campus (PSDKU) of the University of North Sumatra in Supporting the Sustainability of State Higher Education in North Nias Regency

The findings demonstrate that the sustainability of PSDKU Universitas Sumatera Utara in North Nias Regency is not merely determined by academic management, infrastructure availability, or financial support, but is strongly influenced by the quality of communication relationships among development actors. Although PSDKU has obtained institutional legitimacy through cooperation between Universitas Sumatera Utara and the Government of North Nias Regency, the implementation process reveals a gap between policy objectives and social acceptance at the community level. This finding expands the understanding of development communication by showing that institutional sustainability requires more than the transmission of development programs. In the case of PSDKU, communication functions as a mechanism for building legitimacy, trust, and collective ownership among stakeholders. The existence of formal cooperation agreements provides administrative legitimacy, but it does not automatically create social legitimacy. The sustainability of educational institutions in peripheral regions depends on whether communities perceive the institution as part of their development process rather than merely as an external government program. This condition reflects an important issue in participatory development communication.

As emphasized by (Phillips, 2011) and (Nur Hanifah, 2025) communication for social

Amorti: Journal of Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies ISSN 2962-9209
Vol. 5, No. 2, April 2026, pp. 1200-1209

change requires dialogue and participation rather than one-way information delivery. The findings show that PSDKU communication practices remain largely characterized by institutional coordination and administrative communication, while opportunities for broader stakeholder participation remain limited. Consequently, communities tend to position themselves as recipients of educational services rather than active actors involved in shaping institutional development. The study found that communication within PSDKU operates through formal institutional communication and operational communication managed by the PSDKU Coordinator. The coordinator functions as a bridging actor connecting the main campus, local government, lecturers, students, and communities. This role confirms the importance of intermediary actors in development communication because they translate institutional objectives into locally meaningful practices. However, the findings also indicate that the communication structure remains predominantly vertical. Strategic decisions continue to be concentrated at the main campus, while local stakeholders have limited involvement in determining institutional directions. This pattern creates a communication imbalance because local knowledge and community expectations are not fully integrated into decision-making processes. The implication is significant for institutional sustainability. When communication is dominated by top-down approaches, communities may understand the existence of PSDKU as a government initiative but may not develop a strong sense of ownership toward the institution.

This explains why institutional establishment does not automatically result in increasing student participation or public support. Therefore, the findings contribute to participatory development communication theory by demonstrating that participation is not only related to the opportunity to receive information or attend institutional activities but also involves the capacity of stakeholders to influence institutional decisions and development directions. The study also reveals that geographical distance and limited infrastructure influence the communication environment of PSDKU. Because the main campus is located in Medan while PSDKU operates in North Nias, academic coordination relies heavily on digital communication platforms. Although digital communication enables administrative continuity, it cannot fully replace direct social interaction required to establish academic identity and institutional trust.

The finding regarding the *"dead campus atmosphere"* illustrates that physical presence remains important in higher education institutions. Universities are not only spaces for knowledge transfer but also social environments where relationships among lecturers, students, and communities are formed. Limited lecturer presence reduces opportunities for informal interaction, mentoring, and community engagement, which are essential components in building institutional attachment. Therefore, infrastructure limitations should not be interpreted only as physical constraints. They represent communication barriers that weaken the relationship between institutions and communities. The absence of regular face-to-face interaction contributes to public perceptions that PSDKU functions similarly to distance education rather than as a fully established higher education institution.

The findings also indicate that PSDKU remains highly dependent on financial support from the North Nias Regency Government. Funding support through APBD has enabled operational activities, lecturer mobility, and student tuition subsidies. However, excessive dependence on external financing creates vulnerability because institutional continuity becomes closely related to local government fiscal conditions. From a development communication perspective, financial dependence also affects communication coordination. Delays in funding distribution

ISSN 2962-9209 Amorti: Journal of Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies
Vol. 5, No. 2, April 2026, pp. 1200-1209

influence academic operations, administrative processes, and stakeholder confidence.

Thus, financial sustainability is interconnected with communication sustainability because uncertainty in institutional support can weaken trust among students, lecturers, and communities. This finding suggests that sustainable higher education development in 3T regions requires not only financial commitment but also communication strategies that strengthen shared responsibility among stakeholders. Sustainability should be constructed through collaborative ownership rather than dependence on a single supporting institution. One of the most important findings of this study is that the challenge faced by PSDKU is not only limited access to higher education but also limited social acceptance of agricultural education. Interviews revealed that agricultural programs are often perceived as less prestigious compared with professions such as civil servants, teachers, or health workers. This finding indicates that the communication challenge is related to meaning construction. The problem is not merely the absence of information about PSDKU, but the existence of social narratives that position agricultural education as less attractive.

Therefore, increasing enrollment requires communication strategies that reconstruct the meaning of agricultural education as a professional field based on science, technology, innovation, and entrepreneurship. In this context, symbolic communication becomes important. The concept of "modern farmers" proposed by informants represents an attempt to transform agricultural identity from traditional labor into a professional career pathway. This strategy supports the argument of (Dutta, 2011) and (Manurung & Pohan, 2024) that development communication must create messages that are socially meaningful and connected with community values. Based on the findings, the proposed communication strategy should not be limited to promotional activities but should address the deeper issue of institutional legitimacy. Social marketing through schools, public lectures, and academic promotion activities can function as communication channels to rebuild public understanding of PSDKU.

However, these strategies will only be effective if combined with stronger stakeholder participation. Collaboration with schools, alumni, local communities, and government institutions should not only aim to recruit students but also create a shared narrative regarding the importance of higher education for regional development. The development of local academic resources, particularly permanent lecturers based in North Nias, represents another strategic communication approach. Local academic actors can strengthen institutional identity because they become permanent social representatives of the university within the community. This supports (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009) and (Manurung, 2024) argument that development communication is closely related to empowerment, where communities become active participants rather than passive beneficiaries. This study contributes to the understanding of participatory development communication by demonstrating that communication plays a central role in institutional sustainability. In the context of PSDKU, sustainability depends not only on policy implementation but also on the ability to create communication relationships that generate trust, participation, and ownership. The findings suggest that higher education expansion policies in 3T regions require a shift from an administrative communication model toward a participatory communication ecosystem involving universities, governments, schools, students, alumni, and communities. Without such transformation, educational institutions may achieve formal establishment but struggle to achieve social sustainability.

Amorti: Journal of Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies ISSN 2962-9209
Vol. 5, No. 2, April 2026, pp. 1200-1209

Conclusion

The study concludes that the sustainability of the Study Program Outside the Main Campus (PSDKU) of Universitas Sumatera Utara in North Nias Regency depends not only on institutional and academic arrangements but also on the quality of development communication among universities, local government, schools, students, alumni, and communities. The findings indicate that existing communication remains largely institutional and operational, while broader stakeholder participation and public engagement are still limited. This condition affects public trust, institutional acceptance, and the long-term sustainability of PSDKU. The principal implication of this study is that PSDKU requires a shift from predominantly administrative and top-down communication toward a more participatory development communication strategy. Such a strategy should strengthen stakeholder involvement, improve public understanding of the value of agricultural higher education, develop stronger local academic capacity, and build institutional trust through continuous community engagement. Social marketing, collaboration with schools, strengthening local lecturer resources, and communication based on regional potential can support this process. This study is limited to a single PSDKU context in North Nias Regency and relies on qualitative perspectives from selected stakeholders. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within the specific institutional and regional context of the study. Future research may compare PSDKU implementation across different 3T regions, involve broader stakeholder groups, and examine the long-term relationship between participatory communication, public trust, student enrollment, and institutional sustainability.

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