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Evaluating Graduate Capabilities and Workplace Relevance Through Tracer Studies: Evidence from a Master's Program in Islamic Education at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Lhokseumawe

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the employment status, workplace relevance, and professional competencies of graduates from the Master's Program in Islamic Education (PAI) at IAIN Lhokseumawe, including stakeholder assessments of graduate performance. A mixed-methods sequential explanatory design was employed. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 116 graduates from the 2018–2021 cohorts, while qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews with selected graduates and stakeholders. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, cross-tabulation, and thematic analysis. The findings indicate that approximately 94 percent of graduates are currently employed, with most working in positions aligned with their academic background in Islamic education. Graduate self-assessments and stakeholder evaluations reveal strong competencies in integrity, professionalism, information technology use, communication, teamwork, and self-development, indicating that the program effectively prepares graduates for contemporary workplace demands. However, foreign language proficiency, particularly in English and Arabic, remains relatively weaker and requires targeted improvement. Qualitative findings further emphasize the importance of professional networking and continuous skill development in enhancing graduate employability. Overall, the Master's Program in Islamic Education demonstrates high graduate employability, strong workplace relevance, and positive stakeholder perceptions.

Keywords: Graduate Competencies, Graduate Employment, Tracer Study, Workplace Relevance

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji status ketenagakerjaan, relevansi pekerjaan, dan kompetensi profesional lulusan Program Magister Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) di IAIN Lhokseumawe, termasuk penilaian pemangku kepentingan terhadap kinerja lulusan. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain *mixed-methods* dengan pendekatan *sequential explanatory*. Data kuantitatif dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terstruktur yang diberikan kepada 116 lulusan dari angkatan 2018-2021, sedangkan data kualitatif diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam dengan lulusan terpilih dan para pemangku kepentingan. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan statistik deskriptif, tabulasi silang, dan analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sekitar 94 persen lulusan saat ini telah bekerja, dengan sebagian besar menempati posisi yang selaras dengan latar belakang akademik mereka di bidang pendidikan agama Islam. Penilaian diri lulusan dan evaluasi dari pemangku kepentingan mengungkapkan bahwa lulusan memiliki kompetensi yang kuat dalam aspek integritas, profesionalisme, pemanfaatan teknologi informasi, komunikasi, kerja sama tim, dan pengembangan diri, yang menunjukkan bahwa program studi ini secara efektif mempersiapkan lulusan untuk menghadapi tuntutan dunia kerja kontemporer. Namun demikian, kemampuan berbahasa asing, khususnya bahasa Inggris dan Arab masih relatif lebih lemah dan memerlukan penguatan yang lebih terarah. Temuan kualitatif juga menegaskan pentingnya jejaring profesional dan pengembangan keterampilan berkelanjutan dalam meningkatkan daya serap lulusan di dunia kerja. Secara keseluruhan, Program Magister Pendidikan Agama Islam menunjukkan tingkat keterserapan lulusan yang tinggi, relevansi yang kuat dengan kebutuhan dunia kerja, serta persepsi positif dari para pemangku kepentingan.

Kata Kunci: Kompetensi Lulusan, Daya Serap Lulusan, Studi Pelacakan Lulusan, Relevansi Dunia Kerja

INTRODUCTION

Tracer studies have received growing attention due to their important theoretical and practical contributions to quality assurance in higher education (Hasibuan et al., 2021). One of the fundamental responsibilities of higher education institutions is to produce graduates whose competencies are relevant to labor market demands (Hidayati, 2021). In this context, tracer studies offer a systematic approach to evaluating graduate relevance by collecting structured feedback from graduates regarding their employment experiences and professional competencies (Akbar & Mukhtar, 2019). Consequently, tracer studies are widely recognized as effective instruments for monitoring graduate outcomes and assessing stakeholder perceptions of graduate performance in the workplace (Zulhimma, 2015; Schomburg, 2003).

Beyond producing graduates, higher education institutions are required to continuously evaluate both graduate competencies and the quality of educational processes that support graduate development (Kinash et al., 2018).

Evaluating graduate quality enables study programs to align curricula, learning outcomes, and institutional policies with evolving labor market needs (Rogan & Reynolds, 2016). Tracer studies also facilitate the examination of graduate transitions from higher education into professional life, including the assessment of competencies acquired during study, employment status, and early career trajectories—typically within the first two years after graduation (Sari & Mukmin, 2022; Saefudin, Sa'idah, & Andriyani, 2019). In Indonesia, tracer study indicators, such as graduate waiting periods, employment rates, and initial income levels, serve as key parameters in study program accreditation conducted by the National Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (BAN-PT) (Setyaningsih, 2021).

Accreditation represents a comprehensive evaluation of higher education performance, encompassing the implementation of the *Tridharma Perguruan Tinggi* (Three Pillars of Higher Education), including curriculum quality, faculty performance, student development, and graduate outcomes (Ristek Dikti, 2016). Through accreditation, study programs are encouraged to meet national quality standards, strengthen institutional competitiveness, and gain formal recognition from both society and government. In this regard, tracer studies play a strategic role by: (1) assessing graduate satisfaction and institutional performance, (2) providing feedback to enhance program quality and competitiveness, and (3) strengthening university-alumni relationships that contribute to institutional reputation and sustainability (Soemantri et al., 2010).

Despite this strategic importance, the Master's Program in Islamic Education (PAI) at Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Lhokseumawe has not yet implemented tracer studies systematically and sustainably. Internal quality audits conducted in 2022 revealed the absence of comprehensive graduate surveys and updated tracer study data to evaluate graduate outcomes. This condition raises critical questions regarding the extent to which graduates of the program possess competencies aligned with labor market expectations. Between 2015 and 2020, the Master's Program in Islamic Education produced 192 graduates across several cohorts; however, structured documentation of graduate employment trajectories and workplace performance remains limited.

To address this gap, the present study aims to: (1) examine the employment absorption of graduates from the Master's Program in Islamic Education, (2) assess the relevance of the Islamic Education curriculum to workplace demands, and (3) evaluate stakeholder perceptions of the professional capabilities of Islamic Education graduates from IAIN Lhokseumawe.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive field research design using a mixed-methods approach that integrated quantitative and qualitative data to obtain a comprehensive understanding of graduate competencies and workplace relevance (Creswell, 2014; Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 1990). The descriptive design enabled the systematic presentation of graduate characteristics, experiences, and perceptions, while identifying patterns related to graduate outcomes.

The study population consisted of all graduates of the Master's Program in Islamic Education at Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Lhokseumawe who completed their studies between 2018 and 2023, totaling 208 individuals. A census sampling technique was initially applied; however, only 116 graduates completed and returned the survey instruments, resulting in a response-based effective sample (Mkrtchian & Belyanina, 2018).

Data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaires captured quantitative data on curriculum relevance, workforce preparedness, and workplace performance. Semi-structured interviews complemented these data by providing qualitative insights into graduates' professional experiences, workplace challenges, and stakeholder responses to graduate competencies (Patton, 2015).

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and cross-tabulations to examine relationships between educational background and workplace outcomes (Field, 2024). Qualitative data were analyzed thematically through systematic coding and categorization to identify recurring patterns and key themes reflecting graduate and employer perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Trisliatanto, 2020).

Data validity and credibility were ensured through triangulation by comparing questionnaire results, interview findings, and official alumni records. Ethical principles were rigorously observed, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of respondents' identities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This methodological approach enabled a holistic assessment of graduate competencies and workplace performance, providing evidence-based insights to support curriculum evaluation and strategies for improving graduate readiness for the labor market.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**Employment Rate of Graduates from the Master's Program in Islamic Education**

Graduate absorption into the workforce serves as a key indicator of program effectiveness and curriculum relevance. Table 1 presents the employment status of graduates from the Master's Program in Islamic Education (PAI) at Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Lhokseumawe across the 2018–2021 cohorts.

Table 1. Employment Status of Graduates from the Master's Program in Islamic Education (2018–2021)

Cohort	Graduates	Respondents	Employed	Not Yet/ Unemployed
2018	24	22	21	1
2019	37	36	33	3
2020	29	29	29	0
2021	29	29	26	3
Total	119	116	109	7

The results show that 109 out of 116 respondents are currently employed, yielding an employment rate of 93.9 percent, which can be classified as very high. Cohort-based analysis indicates consistently strong employment outcomes with only minor variation. The 2018 cohort recorded 21 employed graduates and one who was not yet employed, while the 2019 cohort consisted of 33 employed graduates and three who were not employed. All graduates from the 2020 cohort were employed, and the 2021 cohort recorded 26 employed graduates with three not yet employed. These findings suggest that graduate absorption into the labor market remains stable across cohorts.

To explore the relatively small proportion of unemployed graduates, in-depth interviews were conducted. Qualitative findings indicate that delayed employment was not primarily linked to academic competence. Several graduates reported having applied for multiple positions without receiving interview invitations, while others temporarily withdrew from the labor market due to family relocation, job relevance considerations, or dissatisfaction with salary levels relative to workload. Limited access to professional networks and intense competition—particularly for civil service positions—also emerged as important contributing factors.

From an analytical standpoint, these findings align with previous studies emphasizing that graduate employment outcomes are shaped not only by

academic qualifications but also by structural and contextual factors, such as career guidance, professional networking, and alignment between graduate competencies and labor market needs (Kinash et al., 2018; Rogan & Reynolds, 2016).

Based on the integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence, several strategic implications can be identified. First, strengthening active and sustainable alumni networks is essential to support information exchange, professional collaboration, and job referrals. Second, graduate competitiveness can be enhanced through the development of skills highly valued in the labor market, including foreign language proficiency, digital and information technology literacy, managerial capacity, and effective communication, supported by relevant professional certifications. Third, targeted training and guidance related to recruitment processes, particularly for highly competitive civil service examinations, would better prepare graduates for employment selection stages. Finally, regular labor market surveys are needed to inform curriculum development and ensure that learning outcomes remain responsive to evolving employment demands.

Graduate Employment Relevance to the World of Work

Graduate employment relevance refers to the degree of alignment between competencies acquired during higher education and actual workplace demands (Disas, 2018; Salabi et al., 2024). Survey results show that 101 respondents perceived the knowledge and skills obtained from the Master's Program in Islamic Education as highly applicable to their current occupations. Graduates working as lecturers, teachers, school principals, and supervisors demonstrate a strong correspondence between academic training and professional responsibilities. A smaller group of graduates (eight individuals) was employed in positions less directly related to Islamic Education, such as administrative roles or public order agencies.

Table 2. Types of Employment of Graduates from the Master's Program in Islamic Education (2018–2021)

Job Type	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total
Lecturer	3	3	2	2	10
Civil Servant Teacher	6	18	14	10	48
Non-Civil Servant Teacher	8	6	11	8	33
School Principal	1	3	2	2	8
School Supervisor	1	0	0	1	2
Administrative Staff	0	0	0	1	1

Job Type	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total
Ministry of Religious Affairs	0	0	0	1	1
Public Order Agency	2	3	0	1	6

The data indicate that 87.06 percent of graduates are employed in positions substantively relevant to the Islamic Education program. These roles require a broad set of competencies, including mastery of Islamic Education content, pedagogical expertise, managerial and leadership capacity, research planning skills, and problem-solving abilities grounded in Islamic ethical principles. This finding suggests that the program not only prepares graduates for teaching roles but also equips them with the competencies necessary for educational leadership and institutional management.

Qualitative interview findings further reveal that graduate relevance in the workplace is strengthened by professional adaptability developed beyond formal coursework. Graduates emphasized the importance of inter-campus collaboration, participation in benchmarking activities, and engagement in professional and alumni networks. These experiences enable graduates to broaden perspectives, update professional knowledge, and respond effectively to changing workplace demands.

From an evaluative perspective, these findings confirm that the Master's Program in Islamic Education effectively integrates theoretical foundations with practical competencies aligned with labor market expectations. This conclusion is consistent with previous studies emphasizing that alignment between graduate competencies and labor market needs is a key determinant of higher education quality and graduate outcomes (Muhson et al., 2012; Schomburg, 2003).

Graduate Capabilities in the Master's Program in Islamic Education

Graduate capability refers to a set of integrated skills, procedures, and processes that enable individuals to effectively utilize available resources to achieve professional excellence and competitive advantage (Baker & Sinkula, 2005). In this study, graduate capabilities were measured through self-assessment indicators covering ethical conduct, job-related performance, teamwork, communication skills, and foreign language proficiency.

The survey results indicate a very high level of confidence among graduates regarding their professional capabilities. Overall, 86% of respondents strongly agreed that they possess strong competencies relevant to their work, 11% agreed, 2% disagreed, and none reported strong disagreement. This

distribution reflects a consistently positive self-evaluation across key competency dimensions. A more detailed breakdown of graduates' self-assessed capabilities is presented in Figure 1.

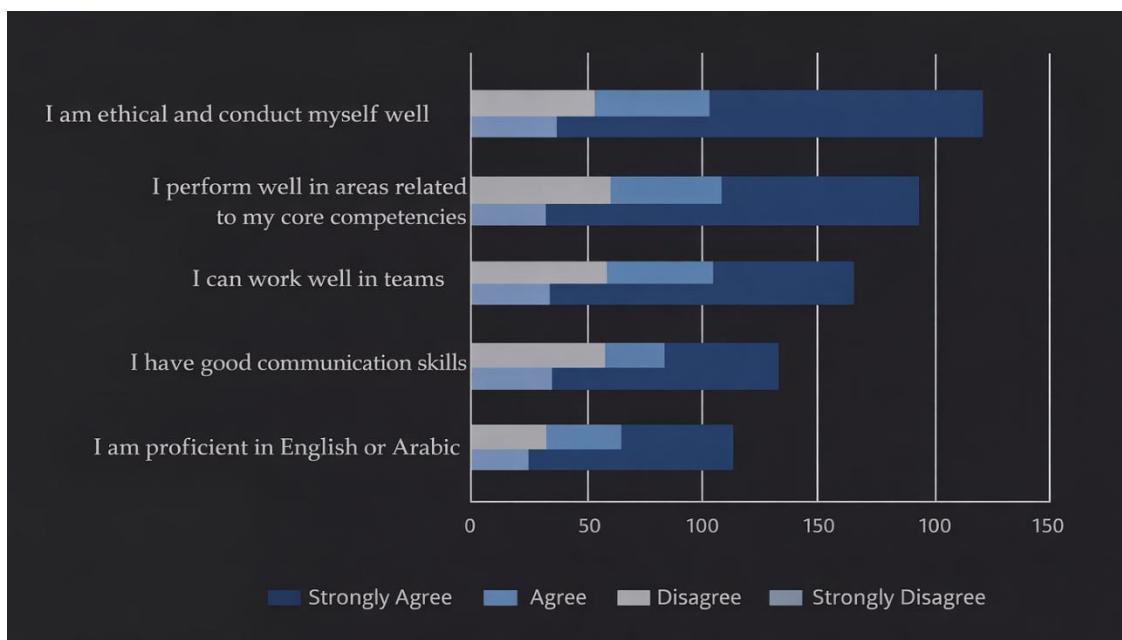


Figure 1. Graduates' Self-Assessment of Core Professional Capabilities in the Master's Program in Islamic Education

As shown in Figure 1, the strongest competencies reported by graduates relate to ethical behavior and professional conduct, core job performance aligned with disciplinary expertise, and the ability to work effectively in teams. These competencies are particularly essential for graduates working as teachers, lecturers, school principals, and supervisors, where moral integrity, pedagogical responsibility, and collaborative skills are central to professional practice. Communication skills and foreign language proficiency (English and Arabic) were also rated positively, although responses in these areas were more varied, indicating room for further development.

From a discussion perspective, these findings suggest that the Master's Program in Islamic Education at IAIN Lhokseumawe has effectively fostered not only cognitive and pedagogical competencies but also affective and professional dispositions. Graduates' confidence in applying theoretical knowledge to real-world educational contexts supports previous studies emphasizing that competency-based and practice-oriented curricula enhance employability and workplace readiness (Muhson et al., 2012; Disas, 2018).

Qualitative interviews further indicate that the curriculum supports career mobility, enabling graduates to transition from instructional roles to leadership positions such as school principals or supervisors. This progression reflects the

program's emphasis on educational leadership, managerial skills, and applied research. Nevertheless, graduates identified areas requiring improvement, particularly public speaking training, advanced English and Arabic proficiency, and benchmarking activities to strengthen inter-institutional collaboration.

Despite these challenges, graduates acknowledged institutional strengths, including varied instructional strategies and lecturers' strong academic qualifications. Continuous curriculum evaluation and targeted skill enhancement are therefore essential to sustain and further strengthen graduate capability development in response to evolving professional demands.

Stakeholder Assessment of Graduate Competencies

Stakeholder assessment offers an external and objective perspective on the alignment between graduate competencies and workplace expectations. In this study, 64 stakeholders who directly employ graduates of the Master's Program in Islamic Education at IAIN Lhokseumawe evaluated graduate competencies using indicators adapted from the Self-Evaluation Report (LED) for accreditation. These indicators included integrity (ethics and morals), professionalism (expertise based on field of study), foreign language proficiency (English and Arabic), information technology use, communication skills, teamwork, and self-development.

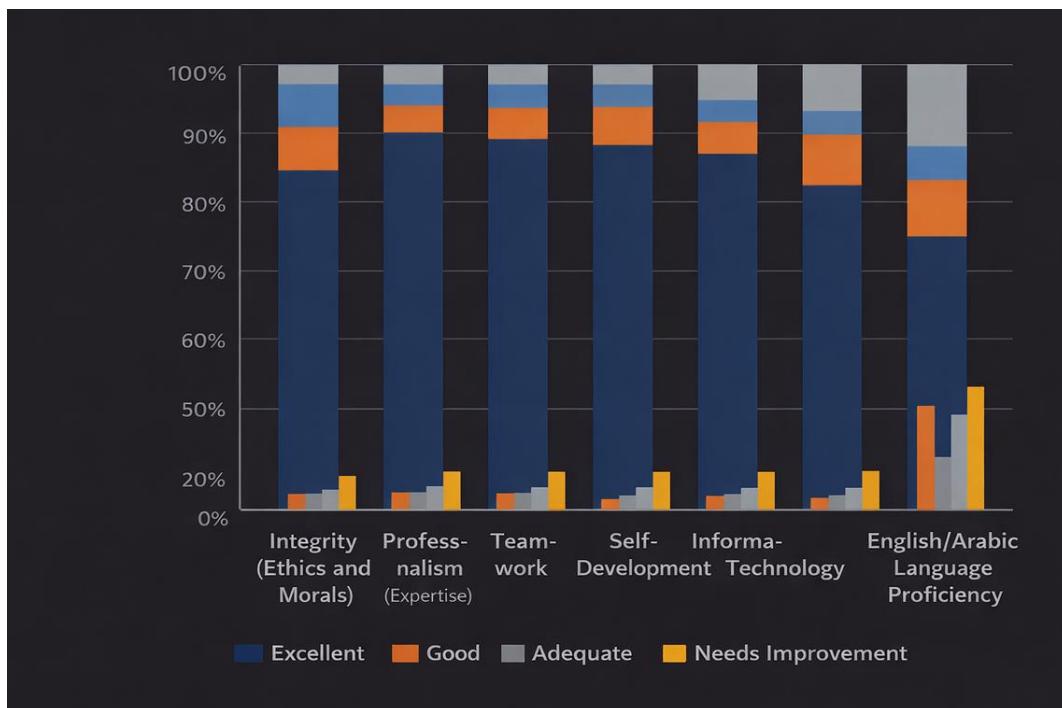


Figure 2. Stakeholder Assessment of Graduate Competencies in the Master's Program in Islamic Education

As shown in Figure 2, stakeholder evaluations indicate a high level of satisfaction with graduates' overall performance. Graduates received particularly strong ratings in integrity (95.7%), professionalism (95.3%), teamwork (94.9%), self-development (94.1%), and information technology skills (92.6%). These results suggest that graduates demonstrate not only technical and pedagogical competence but also strong ethical and interpersonal qualities, which are widely recognized as core dimensions of professional competence in higher education outcomes (Schomburg, 2003; Muhson et al., 2012). From a theoretical perspective, this finding supports competency-based education models that emphasize the integration of knowledge, skills, and professional attitudes as key determinants of workplace effectiveness.

In contrast, foreign language proficiency, particularly in English and Arabic, received comparatively lower evaluations, with 75.8% of stakeholders rating this competency as adequate to good. Although still within a positive range, this result indicates a gap between graduate capabilities and the growing linguistic demands of professional and academic environments. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies, which identify foreign language competence as a recurring challenge among education graduates despite strong performance in pedagogical and ethical domains (Disas, 2018; Kinash et al., 2018). In Islamic education contexts, language proficiency is especially important for accessing classical sources and participating in wider scholarly networks.

Qualitative interview data further support these findings. Stakeholders expressed strong confidence in graduates' work ethic, responsibility, and practical skills, particularly in teaching, leadership, and institutional management. At the same time, they emphasized that improved foreign language proficiency would enhance graduates' professional mobility, access to continuing education, and capacity for collaboration at national and international levels. This observation aligns with Schomburg's (2003) view that stakeholder assessments offer critical insights into graduate competencies that may not be fully captured through self-evaluation alone.

Overall, the synthesis of quantitative and qualitative evidence indicates that graduate competence is a multidimensional construct shaped by curriculum design and learning experiences. While the program has been effective in internalizing core values of integrity and professionalism, continuous curriculum enhancement, especially in foreign language training and applied communication skills, remains essential to sustain graduate relevance in an increasingly competitive and globalized labor market (Muhson et al., 2012; Kinash et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION

The tracer study findings demonstrate that the Master's Program in Islamic Education (PAI) at IAIN Lhokseumawe has achieved a strong level of graduate employability and professional relevance. The results indicate that approximately 94 percent of surveyed graduates are currently employed, reflecting a consistently high employment rate across cohorts. This suggests that the program equips its graduates with competencies that facilitate timely entry into the labor market and sustained participation in professional fields closely related to Islamic education.

In terms of relevance, most of the employed graduates work in positions aligned with their academic background, including roles as teachers, lecturers, school principals, and education supervisors. This high level of job relevance confirms that the program's curriculum and learning outcomes correspond well with the demands of the education sector and related professional environments.

Graduate capability assessments further reinforce these findings. Both self-assessment and stakeholder evaluation indicate that graduates demonstrate strong competencies in ethical integrity, professional expertise, information technology use, communication, teamwork, and continuous self-development. These competencies reflect the program's emphasis on holistic professional formation, combining academic mastery with pedagogical and moral dimensions. Nevertheless, the findings also reveal areas requiring further enhancement, particularly in English and Arabic language proficiency, which remain comparatively weaker than other competency domains.

Overall, the study concludes that the PAI Postgraduate Program at IAIN Lhokseumawe effectively prepares graduates to meet contemporary workplace demands and professional expectations. At the same time, the results highlight strategic directions for program improvement, including strengthening foreign language instruction and expanding academic-professional networking.

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