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Curriculum Relevance, Stakeholder Engagement, and Graduate Employability in Islamic Higher Education: Evidence from the KPI Graduate Program

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum relevance has become a key indicator of higher education quality because it determines how well graduate competencies respond to workforce demands and stakeholder expectations. This study aims to assess the relevance of the Postgraduate Program in Islamic Communication and Broadcasting (KPI) curriculum at IAIN Lhokseumawe from the perspectives of alumni and institutional stakeholders. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, involving twelve alumni and representatives from government institutions, schools, media organizations, communication agencies, and zakat institutions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings indicate that the curriculum remains relevant in fostering ethical awareness, interpersonal communication, collaboration, and community engagement. However, competencies related to analytical thinking, strategic communication, digital literacy, policy analysis, and continuous professional development require further strengthening to meet evolving labour market demands. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of closer collaboration between universities and professional sectors to ensure continuous curriculum improvement. Based on these findings, this study proposes a Transformative Curriculum Framework integrating labour market foresight, competency-based curriculum, experiential learning, Islamic values and local wisdom, and sustainable stakeholder partnerships. The framework provides a context-sensitive model for strengthening curriculum relevance, graduate employability, and stakeholder value within Islamic higher education.

Keywords: *Curriculum Relevance, Graduate Employability, Stakeholder Engagement*

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ABSTRAK

Relevansi kurikulum telah menjadi salah satu indikator utama kualitas pendidikan tinggi, khususnya dalam mempersiapkan lulusan yang memiliki kompetensi sesuai dengan kebutuhan dunia kerja dan harapan para pemangku kepentingan. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis relevansi kurikulum Program Studi Magister Komunikasi dan Penyiaran Islam (KPI) IAIN Lhokseumawe dalam konteks sosial budaya Aceh. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan desain studi kasus multisumber. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan alumni serta perwakilan pemangku kepentingan dari instansi pemerintah, sekolah, organisasi media, lembaga amal zakat, dan sektor swasta, yang didukung oleh observasi, analisis dokumen, serta ringkasan deskriptif terhadap respons alumni. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña melalui tahapan kondensasi data, penyajian data, penarikan kesimpulan, dan interpretasi tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kurikulum memiliki tingkat relevansi yang moderat terhadap kebutuhan dunia kerja. Lulusan dinilai memiliki kompetensi kolaboratif, interpersonal, dan etika yang baik, namun kemampuan berpikir analitis, komunikasi strategis, literasi digital, serta pengembangan profesional berkelanjutan masih perlu diperkuat. Para pemangku kepentingan menegaskan bahwa relevansi kurikulum tidak hanya diukur dari daya saing lulusan di dunia kerja, tetapi juga dari kemampuannya merespons kebutuhan institusi, masyarakat, dan konteks regional. Berdasarkan temuan tersebut, penelitian ini mengusulkan Transformative Curriculum Framework yang mengintegrasikan proyeksi kebutuhan pasar kerja, pengembangan kurikulum berbasis kompetensi, pembelajaran berbasis pengalaman, nilai-nilai Islam, kearifan lokal, serta kemitraan berkelanjutan dengan pemangku kepentingan. Kerangka konseptual ini menawarkan model yang kontekstual untuk memperkuat relevansi kurikulum pada pendidikan tinggi Islam sekaligus memperkaya kajian mengenai daya saing lulusan, keterlibatan pemangku kepentingan, dan transformasi kurikulum.

Kata Kunci: *Relevansi Kurikulum; Daya Saing Lulusan; Keterlibatan Pemangku Kepentingan*

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is expected to produce graduates who possess not only disciplinary knowledge but also the competencies required to meet rapidly changing labor market demands. Consequently, curriculum relevance has become a key indicator of educational quality because it reflects the extent to which learning outcomes correspond to professional expectations, societal needs, and graduate employability (Marginson, 2016; OECD, 2019). Universities

are therefore increasingly challenged to design curricula that remain responsive to technological change, workforce development, and stakeholder expectations.

These challenges are particularly evident in Islamic higher education institutions in Aceh, Indonesia, where curriculum development is influenced by both national higher education policies and the province's distinctive socio-religious context. As a region implementing Islamic values in public life, Aceh requires graduates who are capable of integrating professional competence with Islamic ethics and community engagement. Within this context, the Graduate Program in Communication and Islamic Broadcasting (KPI) at IAIN Lhokseumawe seeks to prepare graduates for careers in education, media, government institutions, religious organizations, and community development. However, preliminary academic evaluations raise ongoing questions about whether the existing curriculum adequately reflects current workforce requirements and stakeholder expectations.

Previous studies generally conclude that curriculum relevance contributes positively to graduate employability by improving the alignment between higher education and labor market demands (OECD, 2019; World Bank, 2020). Employers increasingly emphasize communication skills, critical thinking, collaboration, adaptability, and practical experience in addition to disciplinary knowledge (Faramadina & Fadjar, 2022). Research within Islamic higher education has likewise examined curriculum implementation, Islamic communication, media ethics, and da'wah education (Aziz, 2019; Baidowi et al., 2023).

This finding is also consistent with a recent tracer study conducted in an Islamic higher education institution in Aceh, which demonstrated that alumni employment outcomes provide important evidence for curriculum evaluation, strengthening career services, industry partnerships, and continuous curriculum improvement (Salabi et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, most existing studies rely primarily on quantitative indicators such as employment rates, tracer studies, or graduate income, providing limited understanding of how curriculum relevance is perceived by alumni, employers, and institutional stakeholders. Empirical evidence concerning postgraduate KPI programs is particularly limited, despite their strategic role in preparing professionals for multiple employment sectors.

This study draws upon three complementary perspectives. Human Capital Theory views education as an investment that enhances graduates' productivity and employability (Becker, 1993). Outcome-Based Education (OBE) emphasizes the alignment between intended learning outcomes, curriculum design, teaching strategies, and graduate competencies (Spady,

1994). Meanwhile, Stakeholder Theory argues that curriculum development should accommodate the expectations of students, employers, professional organizations, communities, and policymakers (Freeman, 2010; Jongbloed et al., 2008). Together, these perspectives provide an analytical framework for examining curriculum relevance from educational, professional, and stakeholder perspectives.

Against this background, three research gaps remain. First, limited studies investigate curriculum relevance within Islamic higher education institutions operating in distinctive socio-religious contexts such as Aceh. Second, previous research tends to emphasize graduate employability while paying relatively little attention to stakeholder expectations as an essential dimension of curriculum relevance. Third, empirical evidence regarding postgraduate KPI curricula remains scarce, particularly concerning how curriculum design responds simultaneously to labor market demands and stakeholder needs.

Accordingly, this study aims to assess the relevance of the KPI Graduate Program curriculum at IAIN Lhokseumawe by exploring the perspectives of alumni, employers, and institutional stakeholders. Specifically, it examines curriculum alignment with workforce expectations, identifies perceived stakeholder benefits, and explores strategic directions for curriculum improvement.

The study contributes by integrating curriculum relevance, stakeholder expectations, and graduate employability within the distinctive context of Islamic higher education through a qualitative stakeholder-based assessment. The findings are expected to provide practical recommendations for curriculum transformation and quality assurance while enriching the literature on curriculum relevance in Islamic higher education.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to examine the relevance of the Graduate Program in Communication and Islamic Broadcasting (KPI) curriculum at IAIN Lhokseumawe to workforce needs and stakeholder expectations. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled an in-depth exploration of how graduates and key stakeholders perceived curriculum relevance within the context of Islamic higher education (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The research was conducted at the Graduate Program of Communication and Islamic Broadcasting, IAIN Lhokseumawe, Aceh, Indonesia. Participants were selected purposively based on their direct experience with curriculum

implementation or their professional engagement with KPI graduates (Patton, 2015). Data collection continued until sufficient information had been obtained and no substantial new themes emerged.

The study involved twelve alumni and representatives from major stakeholder groups employing or collaborating with KPI graduates. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Participants

Participant Group	Number	Primary Role
KPI Alumni	12	Graduate perspectives
Ministry of Religious Affairs	2	Employer/policymaker
School Principals	2	Graduate users
Public Broadcasting (RRI)	1	Media employer
Private Media	1	Industry representative
Content Creator	1	Professional stakeholder

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, document analysis, and questionnaires administered to alumni. Interviews explored perceptions of curriculum relevance, graduate competencies, labor market expectations, and stakeholder needs, while observations and document analysis examined curriculum implementation and institutional policies. The questionnaire was used only to obtain descriptive information regarding alumni perceptions and did not serve as the primary source of analysis.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and institutional documents were first subjected to open coding, followed by categorization of similar codes and theme development related to curriculum relevance, graduate employability, stakeholder expectations, and curriculum improvement. Questionnaire responses were summarized using simple frequencies and percentages to complement the qualitative findings without statistical inference (Sandelowski, 2001).

The credibility of the findings was strengthened through source and methodological triangulation as well as member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Information obtained from alumni, employers, educational leaders, government representatives, media organizations, and institutional documents was continuously compared to ensure consistency of interpretation. All

participants voluntarily provided informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

1. Curriculum Relevance to Workforce Needs

Interview findings indicate that the KPI curriculum has provided graduates with a strong foundation in Islamic communication, public engagement, teamwork, and ethical communication. Alumni generally perceived that the curriculum remained relevant to their professional responsibilities in educational institutions, government agencies, media organizations, and community-based institutions. However, participants consistently emphasized that the rapidly changing workplace requires additional competencies, particularly in digital communication, professional presentation, content production, and strategic communication.

One alumnus explained: *"The curriculum equipped me with a strong understanding of Islamic communication and community engagement. However, after entering the workplace, I realized that digital communication skills, public presentation, and multimedia production were equally important for carrying out my professional responsibilities."* (Alumnus 4)

A similar perception emerged from another graduate working in a government institution: *"The academic foundation was very useful, especially for understanding communication ethics and public service. Nevertheless, we also need stronger competencies in policy communication, data management, and digital communication platforms because these have become part of our daily work."* (Alumnus 8)

Stakeholders generally acknowledged that KPI graduates possessed good ethical values, interpersonal communication, and religious understanding. Nevertheless, they also identified several competency gaps requiring curriculum improvement.

A representative from a public broadcasting institution stated: *"KPI graduates communicate professionally and demonstrate good ethical behaviour. However, many new graduates still require additional training in digital broadcasting, media production, and confident public presentation before they can work independently."* (Media Stakeholder)

Similarly, a communication practitioner commented: *"Graduates understand communication theories very well, but employers increasingly expect practical competencies such as digital content creation, social media analytics, branding*

strategies, and professional communication with diverse audiences." (Communication Agency Representative)

Educational stakeholders expressed comparable views. One school principal explained: *"Graduates have good pedagogical attitudes and communication skills. However, schools now expect teachers to integrate educational technology, digital literacy, and innovative communication approaches into classroom learning."* (School Principal)

Government representatives also emphasized the importance of strengthening adaptive competencies. *"Public institutions today require employees who are not only knowledgeable but also adaptive, collaborative, and capable of responding quickly to changing communication needs in society."* (Ministry of Religious Affairs Representative)

Across participant groups, the findings consistently indicate that curriculum relevance extends beyond disciplinary knowledge. Employers increasingly expect graduates to combine Islamic communication competencies with transferable skills, including digital literacy, communication technology, analytical thinking, presentation skills, and professional adaptability. These findings suggest that curriculum relevance should be viewed as a dynamic process requiring continuous alignment between academic competencies and evolving workplace expectations.

To complement these qualitative findings, questionnaire responses from alumni reveal similar patterns regarding the perceived relevance of curriculum competencies.

Table 2. Perceived Relevance of Curriculum Competencies

Competency	Alumni Indicating Relevance (n = 12)
Teamwork	7
Observation and analytical skills	5
Policy analysis	5
Social interaction in diverse communities	4
Professional presentation	4
Professional development orientation	4

Source: Alumni Questionnaire (2025).

Table 2 indicates that alumni most frequently identified teamwork, analytical ability, and policy analysis as competencies relevant to their professional roles. Nevertheless, relatively fewer respondents considered professional presentation, continuous professional development, and

community engagement to be sufficiently addressed by the curriculum. These descriptive findings reinforce the interview results, suggesting that while the curriculum provides a solid disciplinary foundation, greater emphasis is needed on transferable competencies required in increasingly dynamic professional environments.

Discussion

1. Curriculum Relevance and Graduate Employability in Islamic Higher Education

The findings indicate that the KPI Graduate Program curriculum provides graduates with a solid foundation in Islamic communication, teamwork, and community engagement. Nevertheless, alumni and stakeholders consistently identified several competency gaps, particularly in analytical thinking, professional presentation, policy analysis, digital communication, and lifelong professional learning. These findings suggest that curriculum relevance should be understood as a dynamic process of aligning graduate competencies with evolving workplace expectations rather than as a fixed measure of graduate employment.

This interpretation is consistent with Human Capital Theory, which views higher education as an investment that enhances individuals' productivity through knowledge and competencies (Becker, 1993). However, the present study demonstrates that employability depends not only on disciplinary knowledge but also on transferable competencies, including communication, critical thinking, collaboration, adaptability, and digital literacy. In other words, graduates require a balanced combination of academic expertise and professional skills to respond effectively to increasingly complex workplaces.

The findings also reinforce the principles of Outcome-Based Education (OBE), which emphasize constructive alignment among learning outcomes, curriculum design, teaching strategies, and graduate performance (Spady, 1994; Biggs & Tang, 2011). Although the KPI curriculum successfully develops ethical communication and collaborative learning, stakeholders indicated that greater emphasis should be placed on authentic learning experiences that strengthen digital communication, strategic media production, policy analysis, and professional presentation. These competencies were consistently identified as areas requiring further curriculum enhancement.

The present findings support previous studies demonstrating that curriculum relevance contributes positively to graduate employability (OECD, 2019; World Bank, 2020; Moriarty, 2024). Unlike earlier research that primarily

relies on employment rates or tracer studies, this study identifies which competencies remain insufficiently developed from the perspective of alumni and employers. Collaborative competence and ethical communication emerged as key strengths, whereas analytical capability, digital communication, and professional presentation were perceived as the principal competency gaps.

Similar evidence was reported by Salabi et al. (2024), whose tracer study of graduates from an Islamic Education Management program found that alumni career trajectories provide valuable information for curriculum refinement, stronger industry collaboration, and graduate competency development. While the present study extends this discussion through qualitative perspectives from alumni and institutional stakeholders, both studies consistently emphasize that curriculum relevance should be evaluated through continuous feedback from graduates and employers rather than relying solely on academic standards.

A distinctive contribution of this study lies in the context of Islamic higher education. Stakeholders consistently recognized graduates' ethical values, interpersonal communication, and community orientation as important professional assets. At the same time, they emphasized that these strengths should be complemented by stronger analytical and technological competencies. This finding suggests that curriculum relevance in Islamic higher education should integrate professional competence with Islamic ethical values rather than treating them as separate educational objectives.

2. Stakeholder Perspectives on Curriculum Relevance and Graduate Competencies

Another important finding is that curriculum relevance cannot be assessed solely through graduate employment outcomes. Different stakeholder groups evaluated curriculum quality according to their institutional roles and professional expectations. Alumni highlighted the curriculum's contribution to their transition into professional life, whereas employers emphasized graduates' readiness to address increasingly complex communication challenges.

Across stakeholder groups—including government institutions, educational organizations, media industries, and community organizations—participants consistently acknowledged graduates' strengths in ethical communication, teamwork, and interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, they also identified several competencies requiring improvement, particularly strategic communication, digital media literacy, analytical thinking, and confidence in presenting ideas within professional settings. These findings indicate that employers increasingly expect graduates who are not only

knowledgeable but also capable of solving problems, adapting to organizational change, and communicating effectively in digital environments.

These findings can be interpreted through Stakeholder Theory, which argues that higher education institutions create value by responding to the expectations of multiple stakeholders rather than focusing solely on students or graduate employment (Freeman, 2010). Accordingly, curriculum relevance should be evaluated from a broader perspective that incorporates employers, government agencies, educational institutions, professional organizations, and community partners.

The findings also support previous research emphasizing the importance of stakeholder engagement in curriculum development (Jongbloed et al., 2008; Moriarty, 2024). However, this study extends previous work by demonstrating that stakeholder participation contributes not only to curriculum evaluation but also to identifying future competency needs within Islamic higher education. Stakeholders consistently recommended strengthening digital communication, professional certification, industry collaboration, entrepreneurship, and lifelong learning to ensure graduates remain responsive to changing professional demands.

Overall, the findings suggest that curriculum development should be viewed as a collaborative and continuous process involving universities and external stakeholders. Such collaboration enables higher education institutions to maintain curriculum relevance while preserving the ethical values that distinguish Islamic higher education. This stakeholder-oriented perspective offers a more comprehensive framework for curriculum evaluation than approaches relying solely on graduate employment indicators.

3. Towards a Transformative Curriculum Framework for Islamic Higher Education

The findings indicate that strengthening curriculum relevance requires more than periodic curriculum revision. Rather, curriculum development should be viewed as a continuous process that responds to labour market change, stakeholder expectations, technological advancement, and the educational mission of Islamic higher education. Synthesizing the empirical findings, this study proposes a Transformative Curriculum Framework comprising five interrelated components.

The first component is labour market foresight, which encourages curriculum planners to anticipate emerging competencies related to digital communication, artificial intelligence, media convergence, public communication, and religious moderation. Instead of reacting to current

employment trends, curriculum development should prepare graduates for future professional demands (OECD, 2023; Moriarty, 2024).

Second, competency-based curriculum development emphasizes the balanced integration of disciplinary knowledge with analytical thinking, communication, collaboration, digital literacy, and Islamic ethical values. This finding reinforces Outcome-Based Education by demonstrating that graduate competencies should reflect both professional expertise and ethical responsibility (Spady, 1994; Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Third, the study highlights the importance of experiential learning, or a *culture of doing*. Stakeholders consistently recommended expanding project-based learning, internships, professional mentoring, media production, collaborative research, and community engagement to bridge academic learning with workplace realities. These findings are consistent with experiential learning theory, which emphasizes learning through authentic experience and reflective practice (Kolb, 2015).

Fourth, Islamic values, local wisdom, and entrepreneurship emerged as distinctive elements of curriculum relevance within the Aceh context. Stakeholders emphasized that graduates should possess not only technical competencies but also ethical leadership, cultural sensitivity, social responsibility, and entrepreneurial capacity grounded in local values.

Finally, sustainable stakeholder partnerships were identified as essential for maintaining curriculum relevance. Continuous collaboration among universities, employers, government institutions, media organizations, schools, and community partners enables curriculum evaluation and improvement to become an ongoing process rather than a periodic academic exercise.

Continuous feedback from alumni also constitutes an important mechanism for sustaining curriculum relevance. As demonstrated by Salabi et al. (2024), tracer studies provide strategic evidence for identifying competency gaps, evaluating graduate performance, and informing curriculum improvement. Integrating alumni feedback into curriculum review, therefore, complements stakeholder engagement by ensuring that curriculum development remains responsive to both workforce needs and graduates' professional experiences.

Collectively, these five components position curriculum relevance as a dynamic interaction between future workforce needs, competency development, experiential learning, Islamic values, and stakeholder collaboration. Rather than treating curriculum relevance as compliance with academic standards, the proposed framework conceptualizes it as a process of continuous innovation and adaptation within Islamic higher education.

Unlike previous studies that primarily discuss curriculum relevance through graduate employability or stakeholder satisfaction separately, the present study integrates these dimensions into a single conceptual framework grounded in the empirical experiences of alumni and institutional stakeholders. The proposed framework demonstrates that curriculum relevance is strengthened through the interaction of anticipatory curriculum planning, competency-oriented learning, authentic professional experiences, Islamic values, and collaborative stakeholder engagement.

This integrative perspective represents the principal theoretical contribution of the study by offering a context-sensitive model that is responsive to both the distinctive mission of Islamic higher education and the rapidly evolving demands of the contemporary labour market. The proposed conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1.

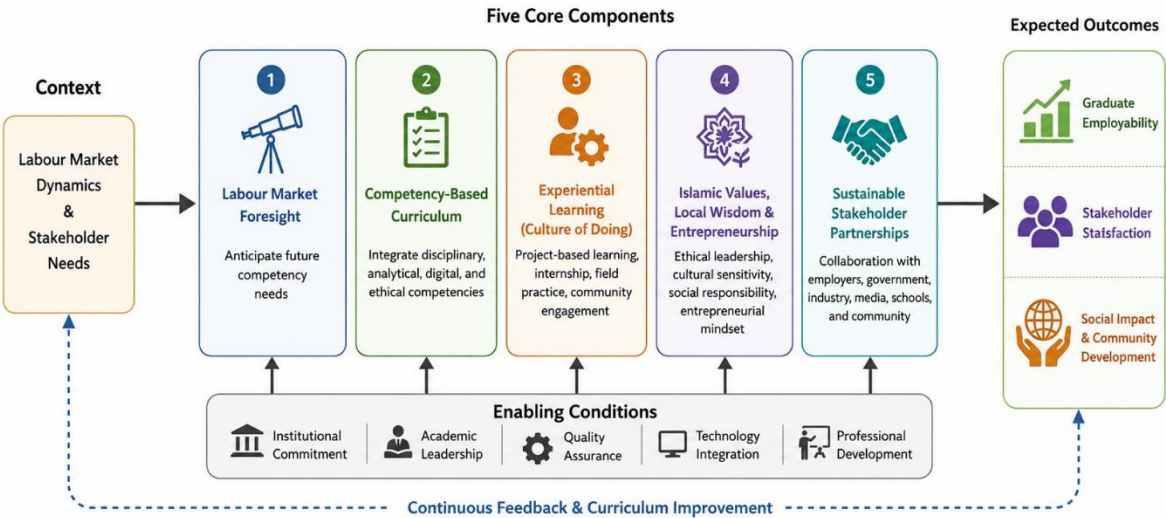


Figure 1. Transformative Curriculum Framework for Strengthening Curriculum Relevance in Islamic Higher Education

Figure 1 illustrates the interrelationship among the five components identified in this study. Labour market foresight informs competency-based curriculum development, which is strengthened through experiential learning, Islamic values and local wisdom, and sustainable stakeholder partnerships. Supported by institutional leadership and continuous quality assurance, these components collectively contribute to the development of graduates who possess relevant professional competencies, stronger employability, and greater capacity to respond to stakeholder expectations and societal needs.

The proposed framework extends previous studies by demonstrating that curriculum relevance should be understood as a continuous and collaborative

process rather than as a periodic curriculum review. It further integrates employability, stakeholder engagement, Islamic values, and local wisdom into a single conceptual model for curriculum development in Islamic higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the curriculum of the Postgraduate Program in Islamic Communication and Broadcasting (KPI) at IAIN Lhokseumawe is generally relevant to workforce needs and stakeholder expectations, particularly in developing graduates' ethical awareness, interpersonal communication, and collaborative competencies. Nevertheless, competencies related to analytical thinking, strategic communication, digital literacy, and continuous professional development require further strengthening to respond to increasingly dynamic professional demands.

Based on the empirical findings, this study proposes a Transformative Curriculum Framework that integrates labour market foresight, competency-based curriculum design, experiential learning, Islamic values and local wisdom, and sustainable stakeholder partnerships. The framework extends existing discussions on curriculum relevance by demonstrating that graduate employability and stakeholder value are strengthened through continuous collaboration between universities, employers, government institutions, and professional communities rather than through periodic curriculum revision alone.

The findings have practical implications for curriculum development in Islamic higher education by emphasizing evidence-informed curriculum review, stronger stakeholder engagement, and authentic learning experiences that better prepare graduates for contemporary workplaces. As this study was conducted within a single postgraduate program using a qualitative approach, its findings are context-specific. Future studies may validate the proposed framework across different institutions, disciplines, and regional contexts using comparative or longitudinal research designs.

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