

Developing a Competency-Based Islamic Religious Education Curriculum in the Era of Independent Learning

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Abstract	This study aims to analyze and formulate a concept for developing a competency-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum relevant to the Merdeka Belajar paradigm. The study employed a literature review method, examining various scientific sources, both national and international journals, and current education policy documents. The results indicate that the PAI curriculum in Indonesia is still dominated by a normative-doctrinaire approach that is oriented toward cognitive aspects and teacher-centered, thus less supportive of the realization of freedom of thought and independent learning, as embodied in the spirit of Merdeka Belajar. Based on theoretical analysis, the development of a competency-based PAI curriculum needs to be directed toward integrating spiritual, social, and personal values with 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity, rooted in Islamic values. This study concludes that transforming the PAI curriculum toward a competency-based model is a strategic step towards building contextual, adaptive Islamic education that is oriented toward character development and holistic competency of students in the Merdeka Belajar era.	
Keywords	Competence; Curriculum Innovation; Independent Learning; Islamic Education; Islamic Religious Education Curriculum	
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1. INTRODUCTION

The change in the national education paradigm through the Independent Learning and Independent Campus policies has brought a new direction to the education system in Indonesia.(Simatupang & Yuhertiana, 2021)This policy emphasizes the importance of freedom of thought, creativity, and the holistic development of students' potential. Education is no longer viewed merely as a process of transferring knowledge, but rather as an effort to empower individuals to think critically, innovate, and adapt to the dynamics of the times. In this context, every subject, including Islamic Religious Education (PAI), is required to adapt to the demands of the 21st century, which

demands balanced spiritual, social, and intellectual competencies.

Curriculum development is a systematic process of designing, implementing, and evaluating learning experiences to help students achieve desired educational goals. Historically, curriculum development theories can be classified into two main paradigms: the classical model and the modern model. The classical model, as pioneered by Ralph Tyler (1949), emphasizes a rational, objective-based approach.(Noushad, 2024). Tyler proposed four fundamental questions that must be answered in every curriculum development process, namely: (1) what educational goals are to be achieved; (2) what learning experiences can provide opportunities to achieve these goals; (3) how are these learning experiences organized effectively; and (4) how can their effectiveness be evaluated. This approach is linear and positions the curriculum as a technical tool that can be controlled and evaluated through learning outcomes.

Hilda Taba (1962) developed an inductive model that proceeds from needs analysis at the classroom level to curriculum development at the institutional level.(Ni'matul'Izzah et al., 2025)Taba emphasized the importance of teacher involvement in the curriculum development process because teachers are the main agents who understand the characteristics of students. Peter Oliva (1992) enriched the classical model by introducing the relationship between philosophical, social, and administrative components in the curriculum system, emphasizing that the curriculum is not only academic, but also social and organizational.(Gofur et al., 2022).

The modern model developed by Ornstein and Hunkins (2018) shifts the paradigm of curriculum development toward a more dynamic and contextual one. They view the curriculum as an open system influenced by social, cultural, technological, and political factors.(La Ode Muhammad Safarudin, 2021)Modern curricula are no longer oriented toward a single goal, but rather toward students' competencies and capabilities to adapt to changing times. These principles later developed into the concepts of outcomes-based curriculum (OBC) and competency-based education (CBE).

The outcomes-based curriculum principle emphasizes the importance of designing learning experiences that produce measurable outcomes in accordance with expected competency standards. Competency-based education, on the other hand, focuses on the mastery of integrated skills, attitudes, and knowledge, rather than simply mastering material. In the context of religious education, this paradigm demands that the curriculum not only shapes cognitive aspects but also the character, spirituality, and social skills of students. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a strategic role in shaping the character, morals, and spirituality of students. According to Muhaimin (2012), the PAI curriculum must function as a means of integrating knowledge and Islamic values, thereby producing individuals who are faithful, have noble character, and contribute positively to society.(Abdurrohman, 2022)The primary goal of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is to create a perfect human being with a

balance between intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. However, the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum in Indonesia still faces serious challenges, particularly in its relevance to current developments. In the digital and multicultural era, students are confronted with a rapid flow of global information and diverse values that sometimes conflict with religious values. According to Zubaedi (2021), the primary challenge for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) lies in how the curriculum can instill Islamic values contextually, rationally, and moderately in a digital and pluralistic world.(Fitrianti & Sirozi, 2024).

The Independent Learning Policy, initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek), represents a new paradigm in the Indonesian education system. Its essence is to provide freedom and flexibility to educational institutions, educators, and students to design meaningful learning processes tailored to their individual needs and potential.(Maulana, 2021; Widayanti & Thedy, 2021)The basic philosophy is freedom of thought, autonomous learning, and collaboration in knowledge creation. According to Nadiem Makarim (2020), Freedom to Learn does not mean directionless, but rather provides space for students to construct their own meaning and learning goals within the framework of 21st-century competencies, which include critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration (4Cs). In this context, the curriculum is required to be more flexible, adaptive, and contextual.(Mujiono, 2020; Vhalery et al., 2022).

Based on the theoretical description above, it can be synthesized that the development of a competency-based Islamic Education curriculum in the Merdeka Belajar era requires an integrative approach that combines three main dimensions.(Hidayati et al., 2025; Syafei, 2025): (1) the systematic rationality of curriculum development theory, (2) the substance of Islamic Religious Education values and objectives, and (3) the spirit of freedom to learn that is characteristic of contemporary educational policy. This integration can be realized through a conceptual model that places spiritual, social, and academic competencies as the main axis. Curriculum development theory provides a methodological framework for design and evaluation, Islamic Religious Education provides a moral and transcendental dimension, while Freedom to Learn provides a philosophical and policy context relevant to the demands of the times.

However, the reality on the ground shows that the relevance of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum to the needs of 21st-century competencies remains relatively low. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning in many schools still focuses on cognitive aspects and memorization, with teaching patterns that tend to be normative and textual. As a result, the Islamic values taught have not fully transformed into life skills relevant to the challenges of globalization and technological advancement. The curriculum's teacher-centered and content-based paradigm leaves students

primarily as recipients of information, rather than active learners capable of internalizing and applying Islamic values in their daily lives.

While various previous studies and research have focused on aspects of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum implementation, such as teaching methods, learning media, or learning outcome evaluation, few have explored in-depth how the curriculum design or development model itself can be tailored to the spirit of Freedom to Learn. This research gap highlights the need for a new approach to Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum design that not only adapts to changing national education policies but also addresses the real needs of students in the digital and global era.

The purpose of this research is to formulate a conceptual model for developing a competency-based Islamic Religious Education curriculum that aligns with the spirit of Freedom to Learn. This model is expected to balance Islamic spiritual values with 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity. Furthermore, the proposed curriculum aims to foster students' learning independence so they can become individuals of faith, noble character, and adapt to social and technological change.

The novelty of this research lies in the new paradigm for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum development that integrates three main pillars: spirituality, 21st-century skills, and independent learning. By combining transcendental Islamic values with applicable modern competencies, this research offers a curriculum model that is not only relevant to national policy directions but also contextualized to the needs of future generations. The resulting PAI curriculum is expected to be the foundation for character-based, creative, and globally competitive education, while also affirming the role of religion as a source of ethics, meaning, and humanity in the world of education.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative, descriptive-analytical literature review approach. This approach was chosen because the primary objective of the study was not to collect empirical field data, but rather to examine, review, and synthesize various scientific literature sources relevant to the theme of developing a competency-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum within the context of the Independent Learning policy. As a library research, primary data were obtained through literature searches from various credible scientific sources, such as academic books, reputable journal articles (national and international), conference proceedings, education policy reports, and official government regulations. The literature used was selected based on criteria of relevance, recency (relevance within the last five years), and academic credibility of the sources. The research process was conducted through three main stages:

1. Literature identification and selection stage, where researchers conducted a systematic search of scientific works using databases such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and the Garuda (Sinta) portal to find literature related to curriculum development, Islamic religious education, 21st-century competencies, and the Independent Learning policy.
2. Analysis and categorization stage, where the selected literature is analyzed in depth to identify key concepts, theoretical models used, and trends in previous research. The analysis is conducted using a content analysis approach to identify relationships between concepts and uncover relevant theoretical patterns.
3. Synthesis and interpretation stage, namely the stage of integrating the analysis results into a new conceptual framework that describes a competency-based PAI curriculum development model that is in line with the philosophy and policies of Merdeka Belajar.

In the analysis process, the researcher used literature data reduction techniques, thematic data presentation, and conceptual verification as suggested by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) in qualitative data analysis. Data validity was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing various findings from national and international literature to ensure theoretical consistency and the accuracy of the interpreted information. The final result of this literature review method is not simply a theoretical summary, but an argumentative conceptual synthesis, which seeks to offer a new perspective on how the Islamic Religious Education curriculum can be developed based on competencies in the era of Independent Learning. With this approach, the research is expected to make a significant theoretical contribution to the development of contemporary Islamic curriculum studies and educational practices relevant to national education policy.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research result

Existing Condition of Islamic Education Curriculum and Competency Needs Analysis

Based on a literature review of various scientific sources, both national and international journals, it is clear that the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum in Indonesia is still dominated by a normative-doctrinal approach. This approach places greater emphasis on cognitive aspects, memorization, and the reproduction of religious knowledge alone, without being balanced by strengthening critical thinking skills and the application of Islamic values in real life. Muhaimin (2012) and Zubaedi (2021) emphasized that the current PAI curriculum paradigm tends to be teacher-centered and content-oriented, thus providing little space for students to develop competencies and learning independence. As a result, PAI learning is not fully aligned with the direction of the Merdeka

Belajar policy, which emphasizes the importance of freedom of thought, creativity, and autonomy in the learning process.

A study of the Independent Curriculum policy (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2022) shows that the learning outcomes (CP) for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) are actually directed at strengthening character and spiritual values. However, the reality of implementation in the field still shows a tendency towards formalism and a focus solely on cognitive outcomes. The learning process is often ceremonial and fails to address the affective and psychomotor aspects of students. This imbalance indicates a gap between the spirit of national education policy and classroom learning practices.

Based on the findings of this literature, an urgent need arises to develop a more contextual and transformative competency-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum. Such a curriculum is expected to not only teach Islamic teachings as textual knowledge, but also foster students' ability to internalize and apply Islamic values in everyday life. This competency-based curriculum must emphasize four main pillars: religious, social, personal, and 21st-century competencies. Religious competencies encompass the ability to understand and practice Islamic teachings in depth and relevant to the context of modern life. Social competencies relate to the ability to interact and contribute positively in a multicultural society. Personal competencies relate to the development of independence, responsibility, and self-integrity, while 21st-century competencies encompass critical thinking, effective communication, collaboration, and creativity, all rooted in Islamic values.

Developed Curriculum Model or Design

Based on the synthesis of various literature sources, a conceptual design for developing a competency-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum relevant to the spirit of Freedom to Learn (Merdeka Belajar). This curriculum model emphasizes the importance of balancing spiritual and social values and 21st-century skills as a unified whole in shaping students' character. Within this framework, the curriculum is no longer viewed simply as a collection of teaching materials to be mastered cognitively, but rather as a learning system oriented toward holistic competency formation. This means that PAI learning is directed toward fostering the ability to think, behave, and act based on contextual and transformative Islamic values.

The competency structure developed in this model consists of four main, integrated and mutually reinforcing domains. First, religious competency, which is the ability of students to understand, internalize, and practice Islamic teachings in a moderate and contextual manner, in accordance with the challenges of an ever-changing era. This competency teaches that Islam does not stop at dogmatic knowledge but must be realized in concrete actions that reflect spiritual depth and moral balance. Second, social competency, which emphasizes students' ability to interact ethically,

tolerantly, and productively in a multicultural society. Values such as *ukhuwah insaniyyah* (human brotherhood) form the basis for developing individuals who are open, respectful of differences, and able to contribute positively to their social environment.

Third, personal competencies, which encompass the development of independence, moral responsibility, and spiritual integrity. This domain serves to instill self-awareness in students as individuals accountable to God, fellow human beings, and the environment. Honesty, discipline, and trustworthiness are key characteristics of student character that are expected to emerge from this curriculum, in line with the Pancasila student values that emphasize the dimensions of faith, piety, and noble character. Fourth, 21st-century competencies, which encompass critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. These four abilities are integrated with Islamic principles such as trustworthiness, justice, and *ihsan*, so that students are not only able to compete in the modern world but also bring moral and spiritual values to all their activities.

The integration of these four competency domains results in a transformative and dynamic curriculum map. The Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning process is directed towards a reflective, collaborative, and project-based religious learning experience. Through this approach, students are trained to connect Islamic concepts to real-life contexts, for example through social activities, humanitarian projects, or innovations based on Islamic values. Thus, religious learning is understood not only as an abstract value system but also as a practical ethic that guides concrete actions in social and professional life.

This curriculum model aligns with the competency-based education approach proposed by Spady (1994), which asserts that educational success is measured by students' ability to apply values, attitudes, and skills in real-world situations, rather than simply by mastery of theoretical knowledge. This approach positions students as active subjects in the learning process, rather than as mere recipients of information. Therefore, the competency-based Islamic Religious Education curriculum in the Merdeka Belajar era is expected to produce a generation that is not only knowledgeable about Islamic teachings but also possesses strong creativity, reasoning, and values to foster a civilized, Islamic, and progressive life.

Discussion

When compared to classical curriculum development theories such as those proposed by Ralph W. Tyler (1949) and Hilda Taba (1962), the competency-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum model in the Merdeka Belajar era demonstrates a fundamental paradigm shift in viewing the nature and function of the curriculum. In classical theory, the curriculum is generally built on a rational-objective approach that emphasizes the logical and systematic order between objectives, content, methods, and evaluation. Tyler, for example, proposed four fundamental questions that must

be answered in every curriculum design: what educational goals are to be achieved, what learning experiences can help achieve those goals, how those experiences can be organized, and how their success can be evaluated. Meanwhile, Taba emphasized the importance of a rational and structured curriculum development process, starting from needs diagnosis, goal formulation, to determining learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes.

However, the competency-based Islamic Religious Education curriculum model in the Merdeka Belajar era moves beyond this linear approach by adopting a more humanistic, contextual, and participatory paradigm. The curriculum is no longer viewed simply as a set of goals to be achieved in stages and measured, but rather as a dynamic, open learning system oriented toward the development of holistic human capacity—spiritual, intellectual, social, and emotional. In this model, religious education serves not only to transfer religious knowledge but also to shape individuals with character, creativity, and the ability to respond to the challenges of the times. The curriculum serves as a vehicle for establishing a balance between knowing, doing, and being, where cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects are integrated into a meaningful learning experience.

The novelty of this model lies in its integration of Islamic spiritual competencies and 21st-century competencies, two domains rarely explicitly integrated within the framework of the Freedom to Learn policy. Whereas previous Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning focused primarily on mastery of teaching materials and normative aspects, this model presents a new synthesis that utilizes Islamic values as the ethical and epistemological basis for developing critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration skills. Thus, religious education becomes not only a moral instrument but also a source of inspiration for innovation and progress.

Several previous studies, such as those by Azra (2020) and Sa'diyah (2021), tended to highlight the importance of revitalizing Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values in a social context, but failed to deeply link them to the competency framework and direction of contemporary national education policy. This model aims to bridge this gap by integrating the spiritual vision of Islam into the modern-day competency system. This approach views faith, piety, and noble character as not merely moral dimensions, but also intellectual and social capital that foster student productivity, collaboration, and adaptability amidst digital transformation and globalization.

Furthermore, this curriculum model offers significant added value in the context of national curriculum development. He emphasized that Islamic values can serve as an epistemological foundation for innovative, reflective, and technologically adaptive learning. Within this framework, Islamic teachings are no longer positioned separately from the modern world but instead serve as a source of inspiration for mastering the competencies required in the 21st century. Values such as trustworthiness, goodness, justice, and responsibility are translated into collaborative learning

practices, problem-solving, and the ethical use of technology.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that the development of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum in the Merdeka Belajar era must be directed towards a new paradigm that is oriented towards competency, not merely knowledge transfer. The PAI curriculum needs to move from a normative-doctrinal approach to an integrative, contextual, and transformative model that emphasizes the development of religious, social, and personal competencies, as well as 21st-century skills rooted in Islamic values. This approach aligns with the spirit of Merdeka Belajar, which demands independent thinking, creativity, and student autonomy in the learning process. Thus, a competency-based PAI curriculum not only shapes students who understand Islamic teachings textually but also are able to internalize and actualize Islamic values in real life in a reflective and productive manner.

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